

**Occupying Vacant Spaces:
Precarious Politics of Temporary Urban Reuse**

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all other sources of information are cited accordingly.

Signed _____

Abstract

Temporary urban projects are often portrayed as offering innovative and experimental solutions to the challenges of countering the negative perceptions associated with vacancy, and of providing rent-free open spaces for non-commercial activities in inner city areas. The political implications of temporary use, however, are controversial, being both celebrated as a form of participatory and emancipatory spatial re-appropriation and critiqued as a new frontier of experiential place marketing and a symptom of urban gentrification. This thesis aims to provide a situated investigation of the tension between the potential of re-appropriation and its wider material conditions, to discuss the precarious politics of temporary use as a form of urban action at a time of austerity.

My reflections are grounded in an ethnographic approach to practices of temporary use in contemporary London and in an in-depth study of a selection of cultural and activist projects that reclaim vacant shop fronts for community uses. In this thesis I address three main issues. The first concerns the development of the discourse of temporary reuse, and particularly of pop-up shops, between 2009 and 2011. By analysing media coverage, public events and forms of self-representation of London-based practices and practitioners, I attend to official and unofficial narratives mobilised and performed by a range of urban actors. The second issue concerns the material conditions of temporary vacant shop front reuse. In order to 're-materialise' temporary reuse I engage with the often overlooked questions of access, diverse economies, and labour. Lastly, my investigation is concerned with the potential of these practices to engender radically different socio-spatial relations. Drawing on recent debates around the 'affective turn' in social sciences, I analyse the emotionally-charged performative openness of community-oriented shop fronts as capable of creating places where meanings and subject-positions are challenged and negotiated, offering insights into their potential for transformative urban encounters.

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Introduction

Temporary use as a form of urban action

There is probably an empty building in your street, you may have walked past it a thousand times and not noticed its slow and mossy decay, or maybe you don't know it's even vacant because, theoretically, it's not: someone has taken it over, fixed it up a bit and is putting it to good use, using it as a theatre, a gallery, a shop, a community space or home. The chances are that they are not even doing it illegally.¹

Many city authorities in Europe and North America that are charged with the task of encouraging the revitalisation and redevelopment of urban areas are now finding that, for the most part, they lack the resources, power and control to implement formal masterplans. Instead some are beginning to experiment with looser planning visions and design frameworks, linked to phased packages of small, often temporary initiatives, designed to unlock the potential of sites [...]²

Over the last decade the practice of reusing vacant buildings on a temporary basis has increasingly gained visibility in the public discourse and in urban policy circles. The first quotation above typifies the viewpoint of British media in the early 2010. The second, published exactly two years later, explains the appeal of temporary and interim uses to local authorities in the UK and beyond. Each quotation marks a politically significant discursive shift in the representation of temporary occupations: from marginal, ad-hoc and experimental practices, still shrouded in imaginaries of illicit urban countercultures, to their celebration and appropriation by urban policy-makers and planners at a time of 'austerity' characterised by reduced resources and regulatory powers.

My research into practices of temporary use began with a critical reflection on my own involvement in the mid 2000s with an artistic and activist project that reclaimed a vacant building in the context of a contested urban development scheme.³ Drawing on personal experiences, my investigation rapidly developed into an attempt to understand and analyse a set of practices and forms of urban

¹ Hanra, H. 2010: Art's great squatting revolution. *The Times*, 16th January 2010.

² Bishop, P. and Williams, L. 2012: *The Temporary City*. London: Routledge, p. 3.

³ Some of these reflections were collected in Ferreri, M. 2008: *Acting in the Interstice: A Cartography of Collective Urban Practices*, unpublished Master Thesis, Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths College, University of London. See also the essay 'Acting in the emerging void. Notes on gentrification at Isola' as part of Isola Art Center 2013: *Fight-Specific Isola: art, architecture, activism the future of the city*. Berlin: Archive Books; and Ferreri, M. 2009: Self-organised critical spatial practices and affects in conflictive urban developments. In Naik, D. and Oldfield, T. (eds) *Critical Cities. Ideas, Knowledge and Agitation from Emerging Urbanists*, 1. London: Myrdle Court Press.

intervention that were emerging across the fields of art, architecture and activism, and the ideas and imaginaries informed them. In many cases, with the emergence of these interdisciplinary practices came a reformulation and reclaiming of imaginaries of urban occupations, and a greater stress on collective social and cultural projects in dialogue with histories of urban dissent and cultural critique. Following these trajectories, temporary projects were often represented as experimentally ‘other’ and ‘interstitial’ to urban economic and social dynamics: spatially, as a rupture in the allegedly homogeneous everyday space of the city, and temporally, as a pause or syncopation in the rhythm of everyday urban life. Practices as diverse as guerrilla gardening, pop-up shops, political occupations and artistic performances were brought together through shared ways of collectively appropriating and transforming cities, and temporariness was their way to gain immediate access to spaces.⁴

As I began my investigation of temporary reuse in London in 2009 as a doctoral researcher, however, the uncertain aftermath of the global financial crisis and the recession looming over the future of British cities characterised a very different scenario. Seemingly unscathed by the crisis, temporary practices of urban use had gained strength and visibility as an accepted and recognised form of urban intervention.⁵ Ideas of a ‘pop-up’ or ‘temporary’ city of voluntary small-scale projects such as community gardens and ephemeral cultural centres had rapidly become commonplace in London and other large cities in Europe and North America, and had been encouraged through cultural and urban policy.⁶ The term ‘temporary urbanism’ began to be used to encompass practices as different as short-term urban gardening, city festivals, publicly funded repurposing of large vacant buildings, squatted countercultural projects, political mass occupations and social enterprises. The combination of vastly different legal, institutional, economic, social

⁴ For instance in Edensor, T., Leslie, D., Millington, S. and Rantisi, N. (eds) 2010: *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: rethinking the cultural economy*. London: Routledge; and Hou, J. (ed.) 2010: *Insurgent public space: guerrilla urbanism and the remaking of contemporary cities*. London: Routledge.

⁵ As an example of the popularity of pop-up uses, the British national newspaper *The Guardian* published a special issue titled ‘Is there no end to the pop up revolution?’, *The Guardian*, G2 Issue, 12th October 2010.

⁶ Throughout 2010 and 2011, for instance, publicly-supported schemes for artistic temporary shop front appeared in New York as well as in San Francisco and Los Angeles, as I was able to observe first-hand. Other international examples were discussed and disseminated by online magazines and blogs, such as <http://popupcity.net/>. In Chapter 3 I will discuss in more detail the emergence and dissemination of such schemes across the UK.

and political conditions marked the discourse of temporary urban use as an ambiguous and dynamic field, informed by competing claims and politics.

From the standpoint of critical cultural practitioners and activists, the mainstreaming of temporary occupations and the ensuing discursive ambiguity presented a theoretical and political challenge for understanding vacant space reuse as a form of alternative urban action. In this, the occasional critiques of notions of ‘temporary urbanism’ focused primarily on the effects of temporary activities on land values and the agendas of property developers. In a recent critical discussion of Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams’ *The Temporary City* (2012), for instance, reviewer Tim Abrahams has argued that:

The increasing privatisation of ostensibly public space means that temporary usage often has a very specific role to play as a means of bolstering land prices in a downturn [...] Far from being a sign that modernity is in crisis, the rise of temporary architecture in the cultural sphere could be posited as a sign that news of the death of capitalism has been exaggerated. While some of us run around with The End is Nigh signs around our necks, developers are sitting tight and waiting for the right time to sweep aside the apothecaries’ gardens and build office blocks.⁷

While such a critical materialist reading is essential to draw attention to the production of urban vacancy and the conditions for its temporary use, it is an interpretative angle that deprives practitioners – the organisers and volunteers of the ‘apothecaries’ gardens’ – of any critical understanding of their position within this dynamics, and, importantly, of any power to change them.

Throughout my research I have struggled to combine an understanding of the structural conditions of practices of temporary use with an attention to practitioners’ aims and strategies. In doing so, I have tried to problematise a binary approach that either celebrates practices of temporary vacant space reuse as intrinsically ‘resisting’ processes of neoliberal urbanism, or dismisses them as inevitably co-opted by forms of urban spectacle and place marketing. How to attend to the critical and propositional potential of practices of temporary appropriations without uncritically

⁷ Abrahams, T. 2012: Review: *The Temporary City* by Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams. *The Architects' Journal*, 22nd March 2012, <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/culture/-the-temporary-city-by-peter-bishop-and-lesley-williams/8628139.articlejournal> [accessed 20th June 2012]. It is noteworthy to remember that Peter Bishop was the former deputy chief executive of the now disbanded London Development Agency (1999-2012), a point elaborated upon by the reviewer, who criticises Bishop for raising “the idea of an architecture of protest but fail[ing] to see it through”.

celebrating them as ‘revolutionary’ and ‘resisting’, but also without succumbing to a totalising narrative of crisis-induced crisis-inducing neoliberal ‘austerity’ urbanism?

Appropriating urban spaces: between neoliberalisation and autonomy

Temporary use has already become a magical term: on the one hand, for those many creative minds who, in a world ruled by the profit maxim, are trying nevertheless to create spaces that reflect and nurture their vision of the future; and, on the other, for urban planners to whom it represents a chance for urban development.⁸

In my analysis of the politics of temporary vacant space reuse, its potentials and limitations, I position my research between two major sets of debates around the imaginaries and practices of vacant space appropriation. The first set of debates is constituted by critical urban literature on “actually existing” neoliberalism, following the argument that Western cities are being increasingly re-made according to logics of privatisation and social control, and reinvented as more unequal through global strategies of gentrification.⁹ Over the last ten years the term ‘neoliberal urbanism’ has been deployed to identify the urban project of neoliberal restructuring, and has been used particularly to highlight the contradictory relation between the celebration of urban entrepreneurialism and a punitive, revanchist political response that marginalises, forecloses and criminalises alternative ways of inhabiting cities.¹⁰ Within the neoliberal urban project, an important role has been played by the mobilisation of ‘creative cities’ ideas, through the capture of critical cultural practices and urban countercultural traditions for urban place marketing.¹¹ Vacant spaces and the cultural practices that inhabit them have thus been studied as the visible frontiers of processes and dynamics of urban neoliberalisation, as evidenced

⁸ Preface by the Senator for Urban Development in Berlin Ingeborg Junge-Reyer, in Studio Urban Catalyst/ Klaus Overmeyer 2007: *Urban Pioneers. Temporary Use and Urban Development in Berlin*. Berlin: Jovis Verlag, p.17.

⁹ Brenner, N. and Theodore, N. 2002: Cities and the Geographies of “Actually Existing Neoliberalism”. *Antipode*, 34, pp. 349–379. See also Brenner N. and Theodore N. (eds) 2002: *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe*. Oxford: Blackwell. Smith, N. 2002: New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy. *Antipode* 34, pp. 444–445.

¹⁰ MacLeod, G. 2002: From Urban Entrepreneurialism to a “Revanchist City”? On the Spatial Injustices of Glasgow’s Renaissance. *Antipode*, 34, pp. 602–624. See also Smith, N. 1996: *The new urban frontier: gentrification and the revanchist city*. London: Routledge.

¹¹ For an overview of critical debates around the limits of the idea of ‘creative cities’, see the pamphlet Harris, A. and Moreno, L. 2012: *Creative City Limits: Urban Cultural Economy in a New Era of Austerity*. London: UCL.

in recent analyses of creative temporary uses in Berlin and Amsterdam during the early and mid 2000s.¹²

The global financial crisis of 2008 and its political response through the austerity discourse, moreover, has been argued to present the perfect crisis scenario for implementing further neoliberal and revanchist urban agendas, recently defined by some critical urban theorists as an incipient paradigm of ‘austerity urbanism’.¹³ According to this analysis, the capture of practices of vacant space reuse is the result of a double move capable, on the one hand, to harness and incorporate practices and strategies from urban social movement and the countercultural scene in the name of ‘cultural creativity and entrepreneurial activation’, while on the other hand, attempting to dismantle existing social infrastructures and to implement stricter forms of urban policing.¹⁴ While this analytical framework offers a useful overview of the ways in which urban policy and discourses are translated across cities, and the broad political-economic dynamics that inform urban phenomena in global cities such as London, it also often tends towards a pessimistic analysis that forecloses the possibility to address the potential for critical and autonomous action of practices of vacant space occupation.¹⁵ In other words: is there any possibility, through the temporary appropriation of vacant spaces, of experimenting with and engendering urban alternatives, or is the neoliberal urban project a totalising inevitability?

To keep this productive question open, I have attempted to bring the structural materialist analysis into dialogue with cultural debates and power analysis around the relationship between visual and performing arts, and urban politics. The second set of debates that inform my research therefore concerns the potential of

¹² Respectively, see Colomb, C. 2012: Pushing the Urban Frontier: Temporary Uses of Space, City Marketing, and the Creative City Discourse in 2000s Berlin. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 34, pp. 131-152, and Peck, J. 2011: Recreative City: Amsterdam, Vehicular Ideas and the Adaptive Spaces of Creativity Policy. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, pp. 462-485.

¹³ See for instance volume 16, issue 6 of the journal *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy* and in particular: Mayer, M. 2012: Beyond austerity urbanism and creative city politics. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 16, pp. 558-559; and Peck, J. 2012: Austerity urbanism. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 16, pp. 626-655.

¹⁴ See Peck, J., Theodore, N. and Brenner, N. 2012: Neoliberalism Resurgent? Market Rule after the Great Recession. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, pp. 265-288; see also Brenner, N., Marcuse, P. and M. Mayer, 2012: *Cities for people, not for profit: critical urban theory and the right to the city*. London: Routledge.

¹⁵ This was noted by performance scholar Jen Harvie in relation to the study of the relationship between performative cultural practices and urban dynamics, see Harvie, J. 2009. *Theatre and the city*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. For a similar theoretical reflection see also McLean, H. E. 2010: The politics of creative performance in public space. Towards a critical geography of Toronto case studies in Edensor et al, *Spaces of vernacular creativity*, pp. 200-213.

processes of appropriation and use as forms of affirming and experimenting with alternative and critical urban imaginaries and practices. This means attending to the ‘creative minds’ invoked in the quotation at the start of this section and their imaginative and practical attempts ‘to create spaces that reflect and nurture their vision of the future’. In the course of my thesis I have drawn from critical debates on critical performative practices between architecture, artistic production and activism, and their strategies to challenge and propose urban alternatives.¹⁶ From these literatures I have gained ways of undertaking attentive and situated analyses of process-based, socially-engaged and site-specific practices, many of which are built on the historic critique of the separation between culture and life, and between art and politics, in a broader understanding of urban powers.¹⁷

In my search for a critical understanding of temporary spatial appropriation, I have also engaged with recent debates around urban social movements and the constitution of ‘autonomous geographies’ through practices such as squatting.¹⁸ At times, the prefigurative potentials of politically reclaimed spaces is framed through the Lefebvrian notion of the ‘right to the city’, and more specifically of the ‘right to appropriation’, as the exercise of a collective right to unmediated direct use and of the power to affect change.¹⁹ In this view, occupation and use are seen as posing a radical and direct challenge to the commodification of space and to neoliberal dynamics of temporal and spatial enclosure.²⁰ While captivated by the power of such arguments, in my analysis I want to problematise the idea that direct use is intrinsically emancipatory and alternative to existing social, economic and power relations. Even in the case of critical and declaredly political projects of reuse, there remains a need to address critically the discursive mediation that accompanies direct

¹⁶ Rendell, J. 2006: *Art and architecture: a place between*. London: I. B. Tauris.

¹⁷ Miles, M. 1997: *Art Space and the City: Public art and urban futures*. London: Routledge. For debates within the artistic and cultural fields, see also Felshin, N. 1995: *But is it art? The spirit of art as activism*. Seattle: Bay Press; and Lacy, S. 1995: *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press.

¹⁸ Pickerill, J. and Chatterton, P. 2006: Notes towards autonomous geographies: creation, resistance and self-management as survival tactics. *Progress in Human Geography* 30, 730-746; see also the 2012 special Anarchist Geographies, *Antipode* 44 (5), pp. 1579–1754. See also Hodgkinson, S. and Chatterton, P. 2006: Autonomy in the city? Reflections on the social centres movement in the UK. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 10, pp. 305-315.

¹⁹ French original “Le Droit à la Ville” (1968), in Lefebvre, H., Kofman, E. and Lebas, E. 1996: *Writings on cities*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 147-158. See also recent critical debates on the resurgence of the notion in Brenner, N., Marcuse, P. and M. Mayer, 2012: *Cities for people, not for profit: critical urban theory and the right to the city*. London: Routledge.

²⁰ Purcell, M. 2002: Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant. *GeoJournal* 58, pp. 99-108.

re-appropriations and the ways in which collective use is negotiated, organised and sustained.²¹ In what ways can practitioners and activists claim to engender alternative relations with the city through direct use? What are the power relations at play and how do they inform the prefigurative potential and limitations of temporary urban practices?

London 2009-11: a situated approach

In order to address both potential and limitations of temporary urban projects, I have grounded my research in a situated ethnographic approach to the ‘field’ of vacant space reuse in London. Building on a period of participant observation and in-depth conversations with practitioners and activists, I developed a focus on artistic and activist community-oriented practices of shop front reuse, or ‘pop-up up shops’, across four inner London boroughs between 2009 and 2011. While all projects claimed to re-appropriate vacant shops in order to offer them for community uses, each presents different legal, economic, social and political positions, which I highlight to discuss their strategies and tactics of intervening within existing urban dynamics and imaginaries and of proposing alternative socio-spatial relations. In the course of my analysis I have attempted to refrain from presenting them either as examples of ‘best practices’ or as failing attempts judged against some idealised radical temporary shop reuse, and tried instead to approach practitioners’ claims, and their understandings of the complex and ambiguous urban cultural terrain in relation to which they develop their practices.

To address the politics of temporary reuse as a form of urban action, in my research I have explored three main sets of questions concerning issues of representation, of material conditions and of performative openness. The first set regards the politics of representations and self-representation of shop front reuse: to what extent do imaginaries of shop front reuse reproduce narratives of exceptionality and urban crisis? What are the implications of mainstream narratives of ‘creativity’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ for activists and practitioners who reclaim spaces for social activities? How are the different political positions articulated through forms of self-representation?

²¹ Vasudevan, A. 2011: Dramaturgies of dissent: the spatial politics of squatting in Berlin, 1968-. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, pp. 283-303.

The second set of questions focuses on the materialities of temporary shop front reuse, specifically its legal, economic and organisational forms across different inner London boroughs. What is the relationship between practices of temporary vacant shop reuse and national, regional and local urban policies? How do they relate to local and citywide dynamics of vacancy and redevelopment? How are these projects organised and sustained? To what extent can their diverse economies and forms of labour be seen as alternative?

Lastly, my third set of questions concerns the claim to publicness and openness of community-oriented temporary shop fronts. What kinds of urban experiences are produced through temporary reuse? Are they critical or compliant to mainstream urban imaginaries? Who are the audiences of the staged experiential economies of temporary reuse? What is the 'texture of the experience'²² generated through open public encounters with and through the reuse of vacant spaces? What are the implications of the emotional and affective geographies of temporary occupations for the transformative potential of temporary shop front reuse?

As outlined below, these three sets of questions inform my theoretical and substantive discussions in the five main chapters of this thesis. In Chapter 1 I bring together and expand on a range of interdisciplinary debates in cultural geography, critical urban theory, performance studies and contemporary art theory, which are rarely placed in critical dialogue with each other.²³ Through a critical overview of recent literature on the relationship between critical cultural and activist practices and urban dynamics, and particularly on the critique of culture-led regeneration policies in the UK, I explore the practical and conceptual nexus between vacant spaces, temporariness and alternative urban practices. Subsequently I set out the main themes of my research, through a critical discussion of the power of collective spatial re-appropriation, the position of vacant spaces at the frontier of gentrification, the connection between temporary practices and flexible forms of work and organising based on fluid and 'projective' logics, and finally the performative dimension of reuse as producing urban experiences and public encounters.

²² See Routledge, P. 2010: *Dreaming the Real: a Politics of Ethical Spectacle*. In Birch, K. and Mykhnenko, V. (eds) *The rise and fall of neoliberalism: the collapse of an economic order?*. London: Zed Book.

²³ A rare and important example of a critical interdisciplinary engagement with both cultural critique and critical urban theory can be found in Deutsche, R. 1996: *Evictions: art and spatial politics*. Cambridge: MIT Press; and in Deutsche, R. and C. G. Ryan 1984: *The Fine Art of Gentrification*. *October*, 31, pp. 91-111.

To address the situated and relational dynamics informing practices of temporary shop front reuse on the ground, in my research I have privileged the standpoint of practitioners involved in projects of reuse and their understanding of the position of such practices in relation to processes of urban change. In Chapter 2 I set out the epistemological framework of my approach and discuss the participatory methodology needed to unravel the competing discourses and alliances that constitute the fleeting field of reuse in contemporary London. In my situated approach, I understand practitioners as knowers of urban dynamics, whose practices and positions develop from situated understandings of the city, and whose narratives contribute to varying degrees to the reproduction or critical deconstruction of mainstream discourses of temporary vacant shop reuse. Reflecting on the specificity and complexity of studying temporary practices on contemporary London, in this chapter I conclude by arguing for the need to inhabit precarious dynamics of reuse through a situated open and mobile methodology.

In Chapter 3 I present and interrogate a range of visual and textual materials to shed light on the production and articulation of the unfolding of the discourse of temporary reuse of vacant shops in the UK. Drawing on media coverage, public events and forms of self-representation of London-based practices, I attend to the complex official and unofficial narratives mobilised and performed around the proliferation of temporary vacant shop reuse. In the course of this chapter I discuss the transfers and translations occurring between the 'official' narratives of central and local governments, those produced by third sector temporary urban use intermediaries and finally the private sector actors, such as property investors and estate agents, and their substantial overlaps. These narratives and promotional materials are contrasted with a critical analysis of the self-representations of art practitioners and activists, particularly in relation to the shared cultural referent of squatting during a period of increasing criminalisation that led to the historic decision to make residential squatting in England a criminal offence for the first time.²⁴ The discourse of shop fronts reuse is finally shown as ambiguous and contested, as its promises of alterity are mobilised by a range of different practitioners to promote very different urban imaginaries and political agendas.

²⁴ Finchett-Maddock, L. 2012: No Home for Squatters' Rights: Limitations and Legitimated Violence. *Critical Legal Thinking* website <http://criticallegalthinking.com> [accessed 12th December 2012].

Official and unofficial representations of community-oriented temporary practices of reuse often appear to evade questions about the crucial relationship between the availability of vacant spaces and the availability of practitioners and participants. In Chapter 4 I re-materialise these discourses by attending to the production of vacant shops in specific neighbourhoods and to the lawful or unlawful negotiations that enable practitioners to access them and to organise their temporary collective reuse. In paying attention to the self-reflexive reasoning that accompanies the process of negotiating the reuse of front shops I analyse the frustrations and desires of practitioners who find themselves explaining, justifying and representing their aims to local authorities, to property managers and to the wider public. By following the social and economic conditions of selected experience of shop front occupations in contemporary London, I reflect on the flexible networks of volunteers and participants whose labour is necessary for such practices to take place, and analyse the mobilisation of alternative and non-monetised economies on which many of these projects rely. In this, the often precarious position of practitioners is discussed as both a symptom of wider urban material conditions and as a resource and a strategy for critical interventions.

In Chapter 5 I address practices of temporary shop reuse from the standpoint of debates around performativity, experiential economies and the potential of urban public encounters. Building on a critical discussion of the promises of ‘vibrancy’ and community engagement associated with temporary reuse, I undertake an in-depth examination of two community-oriented temporary shops in their everyday performative encounters with participants and audiences. The chapter draws extensively on first-hand participant observation and on practitioners’ own reflections on the potentials and limitations of claiming and negotiating openness and participation across the threshold of formerly vacant shop. These experiences and reflections inform a critical discussion of the emotional and affective geographies engendered by the practices and by the performative production of meanings and subject-positions. Drawing attention to unexpected urban encounters and their subjective and affective dimensions, I interrogate the celebration of ‘use value’ as inherently beyond commodification and argue for the need to attend carefully to the power entanglements produced by the performance of community-oriented urban reuse.

Finally, in my conclusions I bring together my analyses of discourses, of material conditions and of the experiences and negotiations of publicness as the three crucial issues that enable a critical and performative understanding of temporary practices of vacant space reuse as a form of urban action. With this, my research is to be understood as a critical intervention into contemporary debates in the fields of urban cultural geography and critical urban theory around possibilities for critique and for alternative ways of inhabiting contemporary cities. My reflections on the conflicts and negotiations that occur across the threshold of temporary shop fronts aim to contribute to debates around the potential for action in recessionary 'austerity' cities and their relationship to emerging discourses and ideas of 'temporary urbanism', beyond both performative celebrations and materialist critiques.

Through an in-depth analysis of projects of temporary shop front reuse in London, I have thus offered a situated entry point into wider concerns about the increasing demand on practitioners and activists for temporal and spatial flexibility, and about its implications for the construction of contemporary imaginaries of urban permanence and ephemerality as well as for the conditions of critique and action. In order to think temporary reuse as a form of political action, I have argued that it is necessary to begin by carefully questioning the ambiguous urban imaginaries and assumptions that underlie both celebration and dismissal and by opening to broader questions about the entanglements of urban powers and the possibilities for prefigurative urban action.

Chapter 1

Questioning the alterity of temporary vacant space reuse

New ways of urban acting

What are the new ways of urban action and who initiates them? / Are they temporary or lasting? / Are they only critical, confrontational, ‘oppositional’, or could they also be transformative, proposing something else, while radically questioning the existing laws, rules, policies, models and modes of working and living in the city?¹

In the last decade a ‘spatial turn’ seems to have haunted the imagination of cultural practitioners and activists whose practices have involved various forms of occupation and use of spaces in contemporary cities. A critical attention to urban spaces and their production has characterised strategies and imaginaries of performative and embodied forms of engagement with urban spatiality, not as experiments ‘on’ urban space, but within it, through it, with it. The heterogeneous variety of practices, aims, participants and theories associated with this spatial turn have become the focus of attention of a burgeoning interdisciplinary literature, spanning architecture, performative and visual arts theory, and cultural and urban geography. Several definitions and phrases have been used to identify these novel forms of critical urban engagement. Jane Rendell, following a critical feminist approach, writes of ‘critical spatial practices’ to outline a practical and theoretical terrain overarching architectural and artistic practices and to “explore the spatial aspects of different kinds of critical theory and the relationship between [critical] theories and art and architectural practice”.² Her *Art and Architecture: a Place Between* brings together institutionally commissioned art projects, performative spatial enactments and participatory architectural plans, and retraces the theoretical debates on public art and the distinctive positions of art and architecture in relation to functionality and social agendas.

Similar experiences of critical spatial practices have been analysed through a cultural geographic perspective and collected under the notion of ‘arts of urban exploration’, defined by David Pinder as the result of a “search for tactics, spatial

¹ AAA/PEPRAV (eds) 2007: *Urban/Act: a Handbook for Alternative Practice*. Montrouge: PEPRAV, p. 13.

² Rendell, J. 2006: *Art and architecture: a place between*. London: I. B. Tauris, p. 8. A perspective that was further outlined in the anthology of feminist architects and theorists edited by Petrescu, D. (ed.) 2007: *Altering Practices: Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*. London: Routledge.

practices and modes of expression with which to explore urban culture”.³ The examples provided to discuss this definition draw upon various experiences of recent critical cultural and spatial projects in Western European and North American cities that explore performative and embodied urban dimensions, through actions such as city walks and other psychogeographical strategies aimed at disrupting habituated patterns of relating to the urban environment.⁴ In a more recent article, Pinder refers more directly to

practices that are *critical* and *politicized* in relation to dominant power relations and their spatial constitution, that are involved in but frequently disrupt everyday urban life, that make use of artistic and creative means to question and explore social problems and conflicts without necessarily prescribing solutions, and that resist the processes through which urban spaces are currently produced in the interests of capital and the state as they seek out and encourage more democratic alternatives.⁵

With an eye to recent forms of urban action in Continental Europe, the European Platform for Alternative Practice and Research on the City (PEPRAV) undertook in 2007 “a collective critical enquiry into contemporary alternatives to practice and research on the city”.⁶ The resulting handbook *Urban/Act* offered an important survey of strategies, tactics and networks that experiment with creative, grass-root and collective solutions to a range of urban issues, through ways of acting that ranged from “radical opposition and criticism to a more constructive and propositional acting, embedded in everyday life”.⁷ Temporary or lasting, these critical practices combine practical experimentations with the production and sharing of knowledges and ways of thinking about the city, contributing to critical modes of understanding and exploring urban space. Among these ‘new ways of urban acting’, *Urban/Act* addressed and analysed projects and practices of occupation of residential, commercial and industrial empty sites and vacant land.⁸ As observed by

³ Pinder, D. 2005: Arts of urban exploration. *Cultural Geographies* 12, p. 387. See also the other articles collected in the special issue 12 (4) of *Cultural Geographies*, pp. 383–536.

⁴ Such as the work of the British art/activist collective PLATFORM, see <http://platformlondon.org/> [accessed 21st May 2013].

⁵ Pinder, D. 2008: Urban Interventions: Art, Politics and Pedagogy. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32, p. 731.

⁶ AAA/PEPRAV (eds) 2007: *Urban/Act: a Handbook for Alternative Practice*. Montrouge: PEPRAV, p. 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ More recently, the same network of practitioners and theorists has produced a publication aiming at

several theorists and practitioners whose experiences are collected in the book, there is a need to respond to the recent proliferation of experiences of urban occupation that are not necessarily associated with squatting, yet centre on negotiating the direct use of spaces according to alternative logics of localised action and community-oriented engagement.⁹

My research is concerned with such experiences of temporary urban occupation. Drawing on the critical interdisciplinary approach of notions of ‘critical spatial practices’ and ‘arts of urban exploration’, my focus is more specifically on practices of short-term vacant urban space reuse across the fields of art and activism. As explained in the introduction, my intention in this thesis is to address practices that unfold around the strategic occupation and open use of urban vacant spaces as a specific form of urban action, which demands thorough theoretical consideration and critical analysis. The focus on the occupation and use of space on a temporary basis stems from the grounded observation that critical forms of urban action encounter the greatest challenges when attempting to appropriate a space and engage with site-specificity by attempting to engage with the everyday lived experiences of place. More specifically, while notions of critical spatial practices and arts of urban exploration encompass the use of a variety of urban spaces, from streets to vacant plots of land, this thesis is concerned with the temporary appropriation of vacant shop fronts as a distinct form of urban action.¹⁰

In this chapter I introduce and address the set of debates that constitute the theoretical framework of my research. The chapter is organised in two parts. In the first, I introduce the practices, between artistic experimentation and urban social movements, whose histories, values and mythologies are inextricably linked to the imaginaries and self-representation of contemporary practices of temporary vacant space reuse. Often, particularly for community-oriented practices, tactics and referents for appropriating vacant spaces belong to traditions of urban countercultures aimed at subverting the everyday imaginary and lived experience of

addressing notions of ‘local’ and ‘culture’ in micro-territorial experiences. Petrescu, D., Petcou, C. and Awan, N. (eds) 2010: *Trans-local-act: Cultural Practices Within and across*. Paris: AAA/PEPRAV.

⁹ Negri, A. 2008: Qu'est-ce qu'un événement ou un lieu biopolitique dans la métropole? Discussion avec Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu et Anne Querrien. *Multitudes* 31, pp. 17-30.

¹⁰ The choice to identify the urban built environment as buildings and not as ‘properties’ is a semantic and politically significant. Buildings are property only within systems of individual ownership, to which political appropriations oppose forms of commoning and belonging through collective use.

cities. Drawing on recent international urban studies debates, I set out the frame within which I interrogate the position of such practices in the context of ‘creative cities’ policies and the recuperation of underground practices into strategies of urban branding and culture-led gentrification. I conclude this first part by outlining the theoretical and political implications of the nexus between vacant spaces, temporariness and alternative urban practices.

In the second part of the chapter I delineate the conceptual issues that underpin my questioning of the correlation between vacancy and alterity that informs theorisations of temporary vacant space reuse. I begin by explaining the conceptualisations of urban power that underpins my analysis and the need to attend to the entanglements of power and complex positioning generated by the reuse of vacant spaces, and its relation to temporal and spatial dynamics of gentrification. Subsequently, my attention shifts to the entrepreneurial imaginaries of the labour involved in temporary reuse, to the questions of the diverse economies that support such practices and to the projective logic of short-term and precarious mobilisation that characterise the spatial and temporal flexibility of practitioners. Finally, in the last section I engage with a set of debates around the relationship between performative practices, emotional and affective landscapes and politics, and their significance for forms of urban action, following theoretical traditions that individuate performative encounters as sites for transformative micro-political relations.¹¹ Practices of vacant space use as prefigurative of other forms of social relations are thus shown to require a theoretical framework that explores embodied experiences in their emotional and affective facets. The claim of practitioners to open spaces for social uses is finally addressed through an attention to politics and processes of emergent publics, and to the subjective positions of practitioners and users of the temporary spaces.

A focus on practices

In order to understand the complex positioning of vacant space reuse it is necessary to grasp temporary use as a social, artistic and political attempt to act in relation to pressing questions of contemporary urban living. The act of occupying a

¹¹ See Blackman, L., Cromby, J., Hook, D., Papadopoulos, D. and Walkerdine, V. 2008: Creating Subjectivities. *Subjectivity*, pp. 1-27.

building temporarily, whether through lawful or unlawful negotiations, constitutes a particular form of direct engagement with urban issues. The symbolic and practical tools deployed might be borrowed from the artistic fields such as design and performance, and the alternative forms of organisation from activist experience of direct action and political campaigning, but the overall practices resulting from these combinations go beyond these disciplinary distinctions. Conceptually, practices of temporary reuse can be addressed as existing at the encounters of a range of theoretical, political and practical traditions from which practitioners draw techniques and knowledges to address site-specific sets of urban problems and struggles. In their praxis, however, practitioners may retain a clear sense of separate fields and communities of practice with their own distinctive internal logics and genealogies. Before entering into the core of my argument, I am going to briefly map out two sets of distinct literatures that address practices of temporary occupations, and outline commonalities and overlaps.

The first point of reference for the critical reuse of vacant buildings is to be found in studies of political occupations and of the creation and maintenance of self-organised alternative social spaces reclaimed through squatting. Collective examples in this direction have been developing with different intents and according to different geographies both as forms of resistance to spatial dispossession and spatial enclosure, and as experiments with alternative living, many of which, such as practices of *commoning*, are explicitly anti-authoritarian and anti-state.¹² Histories of urban social movements and other forms of city-specific activism connect contemporary practices to the countercultural urban movements between the 1950s and the 1980s. Recent critical urban literature exploring and discussing urban squatting and occupations often interprets them as attempts to assert a Lefebvrian 'the right to the city'¹³, understood as a collective power to affect change in the context of increasingly socially unjust cities.¹⁴ As recently reiterated by David Harvey in an influential article published in the British *New Left Review*:

¹² In the United Kingdom in particular the precedents of commoning, collective land re-appropriation and self-housing, as discussed, among others, by Linebaugh, P. 2008: *The Magna Carta manifesto: liberties and commons for all*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Ward, C. 1976: *Housing: an anarchist approach*. London: Freedom Press; and Ward, C. 2002: *Cotters and squatters: housing's hidden history*. Nottingham: Five Leaves.

¹³ French original "Le Droit a la Ville" (1968). See Lefebvre, H., Kofman, E. and Lebas, E. (eds) 1996: *Writings on cities*. Oxford: Blackwell.

¹⁴ Mayer, M. 2009: The 'Right to the City' in the context of shifting mottos of urban social movements. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 13, pp. 362-374. See also

the right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization.¹⁵

The collective power invoked by Harvey is pivoted on forms of urban action that seek not only to engage with existing urban dynamics, but also to challenge and radically change them.¹⁶ These two interconnected notions of ‘right to the city’, called by Lefebvre the ‘right to participate’ and the ‘right to appropriation’ are central to recent discussion of urban change. While the idea of the right to the city as a right to participate has been popularised and appropriated since the late 1990s by NGOs and Human Rights Organisations (such as UN/HABITAT), which have used it to campaign on issues such as the right to consultation and participation in urban decision-making¹⁷, it is this second notion of a ‘right to appropriation’ that affords the idea of a right to the city its radical political edge.¹⁸ The exercise of the ‘right to appropriation’ through the occupation of vacant urban spaces is thus an active challenge to the temporal and spatial enclosures of the city.¹⁹ In this understanding the notion of ‘right to appropriation’ stands specifically against “the conception of urban space as private property, as a commodity to be valorised (or used to valorise other commodities) by capitalist production”²⁰, and poses more radical political questions as a right to unmediated direct action and use of urban spaces.

In Britain, the ‘right’ to urban spatial appropriation is to be understood in the context of histories of alternative urban experiments drawing on theories and practices of anti-authoritarianism, self-government and direct action, often connected to radical cultural movements where “politics was about self-expression [...],

Brenner, N., Marcuse, P. and M. Mayer, 2012: *Cities for people, not for profit: critical urban theory and the right to the city*. London: Routledge.

¹⁵ Harvey, D. 2008: *The Right to the City*. *New Left Review* 53, p. 23.

¹⁶ See also Harvey, D. 2012: *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. London: Verso.

¹⁷ UN/HABITAT 2010: *The Right to the City: Bridging the Urban Divide. Report of the fifth session of the World Urban Forum, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 22–26 March, 2010*. This has been criticised as promoting an impoverished reading of Lefebvre that understands rights as legal concessions granted by an external authority rather than as forms of ‘power to’ exercised through direct action. Knut 2009: ‘Right to the City’ as a response to the crisis: ‘Convergence’ or divergence of the urban social movements?, www.reclaiming-spaces.org [accessed 13th April 2011].

¹⁸ Mayer, The ‘Right to the City’.

¹⁹ Purcell, M. 2002: Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant. *GeoJournal* 58, pp. 99-108.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 103.

autonomy and creativity”.²¹ The experiments and groups that originated in the 1960s and 1970s were described by Colin Ward as “*voluntary, functional, temporary and small*”²², and the focus on short-term localised action and the capture of spaces for social and collective uses remained central to the anarcho-punk urban experiments of ‘Autonomy clubs’²³ across the 1980s, strands of which merged with the celebration of subversive everyday practices of creativity at the roots of the DiY and Reclaim the Streets movements of the 1990s.²⁴

It is common for artistic and activist narratives to refer to those experiences as a mythologized past when “real freedoms and legal loopholes [...] allowed the counterculture to operate its few temporary autonomous zones”²⁵, partly also the result of the presence of empty residential and commercial spaces in large and medium cities.²⁶ The connection between vacancy, temporariness and political and creative autonomy was central to the dissemination of idea of Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ) and Hakim Bey’s 1985 declaration:

we are looking for "spaces" (geographic, social, cultural, imaginal) with potential to flower as autonomous zones--and we are looking for times in which these spaces are relatively open, either through neglect on the part of the State or because they have somehow escaped notice by the mapmakers.²⁷

It is important to note how in this understanding the state and the dominating producers of spatial knowledge are seen as creating a homogeneous spatial hegemony in contrast to which autonomous zones are produced as neglected pockets of independent time-space. The concrete meanings and specific theorisations around TAZ and related practices of occupation and use of urban vacant buildings, however, are often difficult to ascertain, as radical and anti-authoritarian urban movements

²¹ Blunt, A. and Wills, J. 2000: *Dissident geographies: an introduction to radical ideas and practice*. Harlow: Longman, p. 28

²² Ward, C. 1973: *Anarchy in action*, quoted in Blunt, A. and Wills, J. 2000: *Dissident geographies*, p. 26.

²³ Hodgkinson, S. and Chatterton, P. 2006: Autonomy in the city? Reflections on the social centres movement in the UK. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 10, pp. 305-315.

²⁴ See McKay, G. 1998: *DiY culture: party and protest in nineties' Britain*. London: Verso.

²⁵ Bradley, W. and Esche, C. 2007: *Art and social change: a critical reader*. London: Tate Publishing.

²⁶ Anning, N., Wates, N. and Wolmar, C. 1980: *Squatting: the real story*. London: Bay Leaf. In London this was also influenced by the decline in its inner city population between World War II and the early 1970s, see White, J. 2001: *London in the twentieth century: a city and its people*. London: Viking.

²⁷ Bey, H. 1985 (2003): *T.A.Z.: the temporary autonomous zone, ontological anarchy, poetic terrorism*. New York: Autonomedia.

often prioritise “action and deed over thought and the labour of theory”²⁸, besides self-published ‘zines’ and pamphlets.²⁹

Between the late 1990s and the 2000s the urban squatting movement in the UK has been shown to refer more explicitly to continental European experiences of urban social centres.³⁰ Italy and France in particular are often depicted in the political imaginary as countries that “have politicized and confronted the use and control of public space as part of a broader contestation to the enclosure of *everyday* life”³¹, conjuring imaginaries of urban action beyond the creation of countercultural communities towards broader movements of political resistance and dissent. Recent literature on contemporary social centres has stressed this shift in the understanding of political occupations and the social centre’s general aim “to constitute non-capitalist, collective forms of politics, identity and citizenship, which are created through a combination of resistance and creation, and the questioning and challenging of dominant laws and social norms”.³² With the development of debates in autonomous and anarchist geographies³³, and a burgeoning literature of academic-activist projects of action research³⁴, squatted social centres are increasingly presented and discussed as practical and effective forms of de-commodification of urban spaces, through an affirmation of use value against the exchange value of land and property in capitalist urban economies.³⁵

The first set of references for addressing practices of temporary vacant space occupation is thus to be found in histories of urban squatting and their recent

²⁸ Blunt and Wills, *Dissident geographies*, p. 38.

²⁹ Critical scholarship on urban social movements and occupations from decades preceding the mass use of digital technologies and online communication platforms often rely on personal and, more rarely, institutional archives of such self-produced materials. See for instance the work of Vasudevan, A. 2011: Dramaturgies of dissent: the spatial politics of squatting in Berlin, 1968-. *Social and Cultural Geography* 12, pp. 283-303.

³⁰ As visible in mailing list and autonomous newsletters such as, for instance the London autonomous spaces e-mailing list ‘Social Centre News’, and the ‘Social Centres Network’. For a discussion of the history of social centres in Italy see Ruggiero, V. 2000: New social movements and the ‘centri sociali’ in Milan. *The Sociological Review* 48, pp. 167-185.

³¹ Hodgkinson and Chatterton, *Autonomy in the city?*, p. 305.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 310.

³³ Pickerill, J. and Chatterton, P. 2006: Notes towards autonomous geographies: creation, resistance and self-management as survival tactics. *Progress in Human Geography* 30, 730-746; see also the 2012 special Anarchist Geographies, *Antipode* 44 (5), pp. 1579–1754.

³⁴ See for instance Social Center Network, 2007: *What's this place? Stories from radical social centers in the UK & Ireland*. Leeds: Autonomous Geographies; and recent events and publication organised by SQUEK (Squatting Europe Kollektiv, <http://sqek.squat.net/> [accessed 14th April 2012], such as SQUEK, 2013: *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles*. New York: Minor Compositions.

³⁵ Montagna, N. 2006: The de-commodification of urban space and the occupied social centres in Italy. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, 10, 3, pp. 295-304.

revisiting through the theories and practices of European social centres and the broader context of ‘right to the city’ movements. While the geographies of squatting movement frame such spaces as antagonistic and political in content, implicitly distancing them from cultural and artistic practices of spatial occupation, it is important to look back at recent histories of ‘politics of self-expression, autonomy and creativity’ and interrogate the degree to which performances of occupation and strategies of social and open use often crossover between the ‘political’ and the ‘artistic’, as will be taken up in the next section. Questioning fixed boundaries between political and artistic temporary reuse will enable exploring common strategies and intents and interrogating the relationship between the re-appropriation of vacant buildings, cultural production and wider urban dynamics.

Artistic trajectories of temporary reuse

The second point of reference for a critical understanding of practices of temporary reuse is to be found in the set of debates that have transformed the field of cultural production around the relationship between visual and performing arts, and urban politics. Without the need to retrace complex historical and conceptual debates on the relationship between arts and politics (and on arts *as* politics), the period immediately after World War II has been described as a “moment at which the desire for social change has led artists working within the sphere of modern art to align themselves with wider social movements or to break with the established institutions of art”.³⁶ The alignment with wider political forms of action and the critique of institutions since the 1960s and 1970s entails two important lines of development for temporary art projects of reuse in urban context.

The first element was the development of a critique of established cultural institutions and their epistemological regimes, with their art/life separation and the focus on the production of art objects. These critiques informed both a movement of ‘institutional critique’, which challenged the role of galleries and museums perceived as connected to the interests of capital and the state³⁷, and a rejection of the division

³⁶ See Introduction in Bradley and Esche, *Art and social change*, p. 9. For a critical review of this collection see also: Holmes, B. and Deseriis, M. 2009: Concerning Art and Social Change. *Mute Magazine* 2(12), pp. 44-57.

³⁷ Buchloh, B. 1999: Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions. *October* 55, pp. 105-143. See also Bradley and Esche, *Art and social change*.

between artistic production and everyday life. For practitioners, this critique opened up the possibility for artistic events to take place outside institutional settings, producing unconventional exhibitions and projects that were “social statements and artwork in themselves – content-focused, temporary, gritty and grumpy”³⁸, extending the critique from the moment of production of art to its dissemination and distribution.³⁹ In Owen Kelly’s humorous critique, since artists wanted to “take art into the streets, and to ‘give it back to the people’ [...] some artists began to take their work out of the galleries to places where they imagined ‘the people’ naturally gathered, in the hope that it would then receive attention.”⁴⁰ Since then, explorations of unconventional spaces for artistic projects have become commonplace:

old factories and churches, prisons and hospitals, offices, houses and warehouses have become not only places to accommodate the art of the past thirty years [...] they have become an integral part of the work of art, a culturally resonant and living material to be transformed through intervention, addition or subtraction. The development of sculpture and installation as place has represented the ultimate inversion of the sitelessness of the self-sufficient modernist object, and the establishment of the specific, cultural and historical place as a legitimate medium for the contemporary artist.⁴¹

With space becoming an integral part of artistic production, industrial and other unconventional spaces - the “old factories” and the “warehouses” of the quotation - have become in the imagination of art practitioners opportunities for cultural production in its expanded sense including exhibitions, performances, as well as dialogical and relational practices⁴². This expanded understanding of artistic venues and sites of production should not, however, lead to the assumption that practices

³⁸ Lippard, L.R. 2008: ‘Time Capsule’. In *Ibid.*, p. 419.

³⁹ Sheikh, S. 2009: Positively Trojan Horses Revisited. *E-flux* 9, October 2009 [accessed 22nd May 2010].

⁴⁰ Kelly, O. 1984: *Community, art and the state: storming the citadels*. London: Comedia, p. 1.

⁴¹ Lingwood, J. 1993: Place. In De Ville, N. and Foster, S.C. 1993: *Space invaders: issues of presentation, context and meaning in contemporary art*. Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, p. 23.

⁴² The widespread use of usual urban spaces as a setting for expanded art practices has been observed by Pratt, A.C. 2009: Urban Regeneration: From the Arts ‘Feel Good’ Factor to the Cultural Economy: A Case Study of Hoxton, London. *Urban Studies* 46, pp. 1041-1061. The notion of ‘dialogic’ is deployed by Grant Kester to discuss processed-based and community-engaged artistic practices, see Kester, G.H. 2004: *Conversation pieces: community and communication in modern art*. Berkeley: University of California Press; while the term ‘relational aesthetics’ usually indicates the proliferation of processed-based ‘relational’ contemporary art projects, often temporary and site specific, see Bourriaud, N. 2002: *Relational aesthetics*. Dijon: Les presses du réel.

taking place outside sanctioned cultural institutions are intrinsically more critical. On the contrary, critical commentators often refer to “a litany of examples of collusion between individual property developers and artists looking for raw available spaces”, as in the case of the famous Freeze exhibition (1988) that took place in a vacant Port of London Authority building and launched the Young British Artists.⁴³

The second trajectory associated with the transformation of the relationship between visual and performing arts and temporary vacant spaces was informed by a move towards more politicised, process-based and ‘public’ forms of artistic production, which critiqued the separation between art and politics by blurring the distinction between practitioners, strategies and knowledges.⁴⁴ These artistic practices included forms of community organising that often operated in connection to concrete spatial issues, for instance around questions of homelessness, urban development and gentrification,⁴⁵ where place, a building, a neighbourhood or a city, became integral to the project. The aim, for artists and theorists associated with this moment of critique and experimentation, was to situate alternative practices in a wider urban and social discourse. In contrast to object-based conventional public art, “the emerging practices of public art in the 1990s constitute[d] interventions in a public realm which includes the processes as well as locations of sociation”.⁴⁶ This stress on process-based artistic production is often referred to, following artist and theorist Suzanne Lacy, as ‘new genre public art’, defined as “process-based, frequently ephemeral, often related to local rather than global narratives, and politicized”.⁴⁷

The spaces occupied by new genre public art practices were often sought outside official venues and structures of funding for conventional public art, which were seen as “complicit in socially divisive urban development”⁴⁸, and they were often temporary. In Patricia C. Phillips’ 1993 essay ‘Temporality and public art’, the

⁴³ See Berry Slater, J. and Iles, A. 2009: *No room to move: radical art and the regenerated city*. London: Mute, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Felshin, N. 1995: *But is it art? The spirit of art as activism*. Seattle: Bay Press.

⁴⁵ AAA/PEPRAV (eds) 2007: *Urban/Act: a Handbook for Alternative Practice*. Montrouge: PEPRAV. See also Roesler, M. and Wallis, B.E. 1991: *If you lived here: the city in art, theory, and social activism*: Bay Press; Park Fiction, ‘Rebellion on Level P.’ In Bradley and Esche, *Art and social change*, pp. 283-289.

⁴⁶ Miles, M. 1997: *Art Space and the City: Public art and urban futures*. London: Routledge, p. 164.

⁴⁷ Suzanne Lacy, quoted in Miles, *Art Space and the City*, p. 165.

⁴⁸ Mary Jane Jacobs (1996) quoted in *ibid.* p. 207.

temporariness of these public art experiences was co-terminus with their experimental nature:

Because the work is part of the urban fabric for short periods of time, there is freedom to try new ideas, new forms, new methods of production. Perhaps there is also the willingness to engage difficult ideas and current issues in ways that more enduring projects cannot. The highly compressed and temporal circumstances are an incitement – and also a responsibility – to be courageous with ideas, to be vanguard about definitions of public art, and to make commitments that concern content rather than longevity.⁴⁹

The novelty of such forms of cultural interventions and their temporary presence in the ‘urban fabric’ became closely interlinked in the theories and imaginaries of critical artistic movement. A third tradition to be briefly mentioned as it is often referenced by practitioners and theorists of temporary urban practices, draws on the Situationists’ concern with creating situations and adventures, which emphasised being dynamic and temporary as opposed to the fixity of prevailing urban social organisation.⁵⁰ These major shifts in the development of the relationship between artistic production and urban spaces have thus contributed to establishing a practical and imaginary tradition for contemporary temporary artistic practices in vacant urban spaces.

What begins to appear through this brief overview of histories of activist and artistic reuse is a set of shared cultural imaginaries belonging to recent forms of active critique of urban dynamics and of the relationship between cultural production and wider social issues. These referents, rooted in the broader movements of cultural and political dissent of the 1970s and their subsequent translations and refinement in the 1980s and 1990s, frame temporary practices of vacant space occupation as non-conformist, autonomous, experimental and politicised reclaiming of imaginary and physical spaces for engagement with wider urban dynamics. To what extent have these cultural referents been translated from marginalised practices to the mainstream, and how have they influenced urban and cultural policy-making? How

⁴⁹ Phillips, P. 1993: Temporality and public art. In Senie, H. and Webster, S. (eds) *Critical Issues in Public Art. Content, Context and Controversy*. New York: HarperCollins, p. 301.

⁵⁰ For a critical discussion of Situationist concepts in urbanism, see Chapter 5 in Pinder, D. 2005: *Visions of the city: utopianism, power and politics in twentieth-century urbanism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

has the cultural urban context against which practices of vacant space reuse take place changed and responded to these critiques?

A legacy, rebranded: temporary reuse as place marketing

The changing discourses and practices of artistic and activist uses of vacant buildings are inseparable from the broader urban economic shifts which affected Western metropolises and large cities since the 1970s, particularly in contexts of de-industrialisation, depopulation and urban decay. The ensuing changes in urban development agendas in 1980s meant that cultural activities “were increasingly valued in terms of their ability to foster a new image for the city” and as “a vehicle through which cities could distinguish themselves, as well as the goods and services they produced”.⁵¹ For many authors, this shift is to be understood as the result of advances in processes and theories of urban branding, and more specifically of a recent history of incorporation of urban subcultures into the production of ‘creative cities’ imaginaries.⁵²

Sociologist Miriam Greenberg has identified late 1970s New York as an important test bed for the development of new approaches to urban branding in relation to urban decay and vacancy.⁵³ In her analysis of new branding strategies, she discusses the idea and imaginary of the de-populated inner neighbourhood as an ‘abandoned movie set’ where artists and other creative subjects could project and experiment with new forms, concepts and subjective identities, exploring the possibility for “visionary young people to assume new identities and styles, invent new artistic scenes, and imagine themselves as stars in their own New York movie”.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Edensor, T., Leslie, D., Millington, S. and Rantisi, N. (eds) 2010: *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: rethinking the cultural economy*. London: Routledge, pp. 2-3. See also Molotch, H. 1996: LA as Design Product: How Art Works in a Regional Economy. In Scott, A.J. and Soja, E., editors, *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

⁵² Symbolic urban imaginaries are by no means to be understood as homogeneous, but as coexisting and competing against each other in the context of an uneven playing field.

⁵³ Greenberg, M. 2000: Branding Cities. *Urban Affairs Review* 36, pp. 228-263; and Greenberg, M. 2008: *Branding New York: how a city in crisis was sold to the world*. London: Routledge; see also Greenberg, M. 2011: The Abandoned Movie Set: Art, Space, and the Politics of Crisis in 1970s-era New York City (conference paper). *Cultural Landscapes of Boom and Bust*, UCL Department of Geography.

⁵⁴ Greenberg, *Branding New York*, p. 146.

In the context of municipal fiscal crisis and urban shrinkage, the flourishing of artistic spaces and experimentations was directly related to the presence of abandoned decayed buildings in inner-city neighbourhoods, which were re-invented as a creative hotbed of experimental cultural productions and urban lifestyles. The municipality encouraged and capitalised on these practices and trends through a site-specific concurrence of policy interventions, marketing campaigns, presence of the film industry and the work of newly established urban lifestyle magazines. These were critical to the promotion and propagation of the urban trope of ‘creativity amid urban decay’⁵⁵ identified by many commentators as a focal point of symbolic identification between art practices and marginalised urban areas.

While the immediate results of New York city branding was the attraction of potential new residents, tourists, inward investment and firms, the long-term effects of these new ‘branded urban imaginaries’⁵⁶ were to haunt the understanding of the relation between art and urban decay (and renewal) for generations to come, and to be applied to very diverse socio-economic circumstances, far from those bankrupt and depopulated landscapes.⁵⁷ During the 1991-1993 recession, for instance, Sharon Zukin observed the temporary uses of unfinished vacant store fronts in mid town Manhattan by contemporary art dealers, where the exhibition was offered to passersby “displayed as if it were a free, public good; and it would never have been there had the storefront been rented by a more usual commercial tenant”.⁵⁸ The art market’s reuse of the empty storefront exemplified Zukin’s thesis that in times of economic recession the symbolic economy performs a take over of productive economies, enrolling cultural practices to “produce and promote imaginative reconstructions of the city”,⁵⁹ to be projected onto abandoned scenarios and to serve the purpose of ‘selling’ urban growth.

With public authorities becoming increasingly aware of strategies of space branding and place marketing, publicly-funded temporary event-based cultural urban

⁵⁵ Zukin, S. 2008: Consuming authenticity. *Cultural Studies* 22, pp. 729-730.

⁵⁶ Greenberg, Branding Cities, pp. 228-263.

⁵⁷ Greenberg talks of ‘powerful interrelationship between urbanisation and representation’ following Lefebvre’s argument that representational space is to be seen ‘as an objective and productive social force, with real material effects, playing an integral role in shaping modern forms of production, consumptions and the collective ‘dreamscape’, from Lefebvre, H. 1991: *The production of space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, cited in Greenberg, *Branding New York*, p. 20.

⁵⁸ Zukin, S. 1995: *The cultures of cities*. Cambridge, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 4-6.

⁵⁹ Sharon Zukin had analysed the practice of renting vacant retail space for art installations in New York in her book *The cultures of cities*, during the recession 1991-1993, describing it as ‘an even more surreal example of culture framing space to project an image of urban growth’, p. 17.

uses since the 1990s have become important elements of the re-invention of the symbolic economies of cities. While many commentators have discussed the ‘disneyfication’ and homogenisation of place-based cultural development⁶⁰, others have drawn attention, following a materialist analysis of urban dynamics⁶¹, to the “paradox inherent to the process of mobilizing culture, heritage, and history in the search for “monopoly rents” which characterizes capitalist urban development”.⁶² Harvey’s notion of ‘monopoly rent’, in particular, points at the tension between capital’s need for place-specificity and the effects of standardised cultural production and consumption.

According to Claire Colomb, the international proliferation of ‘creative cities’ theses in the early and mid 2000s provided a solution to this inherent contradiction. Richard Florida’s urban script developed in *The Rise of the Creative Class*⁶³, with its mixture of individualistic, market-oriented elements, on the one hand, and liberal and progressive themes such as the embrace of social diversity, arts and culture⁶⁴, on the other, valued ‘authentic’ subcultural uses and prepared the ground for the incorporation of alternative ‘temporary urban space’ uses into the branding efforts of local authorities in the context of symbolic interurban competition. The reception and incorporation of the ‘creative city’ discourse of encouraging creative ‘soft infrastructures’ and investing in small scale cosmetic cultural interventions has been argued to take the “processes of cultural commodification and artistically inflected place promotion, which have existed since the 1970s one step further.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Zukin, *The cultures of cities*.

⁶¹ Harvey, D. 1989: From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: the Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler* 71, pp. 3-17; Harvey, D. 2001: The Art of Rent: Globalisation, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture, in *Spaces of capital: towards a critical geography*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 394- 411.

⁶² Colomb, C. 2012: Pushing the Urban Frontier: Temporary Uses of Space, City Marketing, and the Creative City Discourse in 2000s Berlin. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 34, pp. 131-152.

⁶³ Florida, R.L. 2002: *The rise of the creative class: and how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*. New York: Basic Books.

⁶⁴ Peck, J. 2007: The Creativity Fix. *Variant*, 34, <http://www.variant.org.uk/34texts/creativityfix.html> [accessed 11th January 2011].

⁶⁵ Colomb, 2012: Pushing the Urban Frontier, p. 142. According to Evans, ‘a social-cultural market’ has now developed, for art and creative activities in alternative venues, such as hospitals, housing estates and open spaces. Evans, G. 2010: Creative spaces and the art of urban living. In Edensor et al, *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity*, p. 30; see also Evans, G. 2007: Tourism Creativity and the City. In Richards, G. (ed.) *Tourism Creativity and Development*: London: Routledge, pp. 35-48.

The phenomenon has been analysed in relation to cities such as Berlin and Amsterdam⁶⁶ in conjunction with the international transfer of ‘creative city’ policymaking and urban growth strategies. Colomb’s work on place marketing in Berlin since 2000s, for instance, has shown the extent of the incorporation of temporary urban uses into urban policy making as strongly connected to a shift in local development policies “toward the explicit promotion of the cultural industries and the concept of the “creative city” to encourage “creative spaces, of which former “urban voids” are a key component”.⁶⁷ Similar incorporations of ‘fringe’, temporary practices of empty space use into urban policy making have been discussed by Jamie Peck with regards to Amsterdam, and an analysis of recent coordinated place marketing efforts in the context of the inclusion of formerly radical alternative spaces through ‘broedplaatsen’ (breeding places) schemes.⁶⁸ To what extent has the mainstreaming of countercultural urban practices permeated policy discourse of city branding over the last decade? How have such policy discourses transferred across networks of interurban competition⁶⁹ and embedded themselves within specific geographies of culture-led urban development?

Culture-led regeneration in the UK

Discourses of urban creativity and regeneration are not just relevant to policy makers and other powerful urban actors; on the contrary, the ‘creative city’ provides a pervasive image of urban success capable of mobilising a wide civic audience that includes cultural practitioners themselves. No matter how flawed and simplistic the discourse of the ‘creative cities’ may be, it *becomes* real when a series of powerful

⁶⁶ Oudenampsen, M. 2006: Extreme Makeover. *Mute Magazine* [online]; and Oudenampsen, M. 2007: Back to the Future of the Creative City: Amsterdam's creative redevelopment and the art of deception. *Mute Magazine* [online].

⁶⁷ Colomb uses of the notion of place marketing to refer “to the intentional and organized process of construction and dissemination of a discourse on, and images of, a city, in order to attract tourists and investors or generate the support of local residents for a particular urban vision.” See Colomb, C. 2012: Pushing the Urban Frontier: Temporary Uses of Space, City Marketing, and the Creative City Discourse in 2000s Berlin. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 34, p. 138.

⁶⁸ Peck, J. 2011: Recreative City: Amsterdam, Vehicular Ideas and the Adaptive Spaces of Creativity Policy. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, pp. 15-16.

⁶⁹ McCann, E. and Ward, K. 2011: *Mobile urbanism: cities and policymaking in the global age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

and less powerful actors invest meaning, energy and desires into its embodiment.⁷⁰ As observed by Jamie Peck, it is a discourse that,

has found, constituted and enrolled a widened civic audience for projects of new-age urban revitalisation, anointing favoured strategies and privileged actors [...] This is a script that gives urban actors significant new roles, while prodding them with talk of new competitive threats, and on recent evidence they have been extremely keen to get in on the act.⁷¹

The 'new role' assigned to cultural practitioners is decidedly entrepreneurial and involves a seductive redefinition of the value of cultural and social capital and skills⁷², and of the abilities of cultural interventions to affect and modify urban spaces. The proliferation of notions of creative and culture-led urban development has thus relied on practitioners and cultural advocates embracing the discourse and by the early 2000s, the relationship between the new economic development promised by the 'creative industries' and urban regeneration have become commonplace. A poignant example of this can be found in recent publications by urban cultural labour scholar Ann Markusen aimed at influencing cultural policy by promoting the positive relationship between urban development and grass-root entrepreneurial cultural and artistic temporary reuse across the United States.⁷³

Similarly, in British urban and cultural policy-making "culture and creativity and their spatial and place-making dimensions [...] [have been] used in arguments in support of the social and community cohesion impacts of the arts *as well as* the more

⁷⁰ Peck, J. 2005: Struggling with the Creative Class. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29, pp. 740-770.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 741.

⁷² Edensor et al, *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity*, p. 4.

⁷³ See Markusen, A. 2011: The geography of urban creativity: human capital and place-making. *Cities Group's Annual Lecture*, King's College London. In a White Paper commissioned by the US National Endowment for the Arts (equivalent to the UK 'Arts Council'), Markusen argues that "instead of a single arts center or a cluster of large arts and cultural institutions, contemporary creative placemaking envisions a more decentralized portfolio of spaces acting as creative crucibles. In each, arts and culture exist cheek-by-jowl with private sector export and retail businesses and mixed-income housing, *often occupying buildings and lots that had been vacant and under-used*. [...] In smaller towns, traditional cultural practices and landscapes are transformed into distinctive cultural centres and festivals *that revive emptying downtowns and attract regional visitors*. Large cultural institutions, *often inspired by their smaller counterparts, are increasingly engaging in active placemaking* [emphasis added]." In her white paper, references to creative and alternative reuses of 'vacant auto plants, warehouses, and hotels', 'vacant industrial spaces and run-down housing', 'underutilised land, buildings, and infrastructure' are central in her country-wide survey, and are promoted as "a means *to breathe new life into a vacant eyesore downtown*, a catalyst for surrounding neighbourhoods' *revitalization*, and a way to break down a barrier isolating a marginalized part of town"[emphasis added]. Markusen, A. and Gadwa, A. 2010: Creative Placemaking (White Paper). *National Endowment for the Arts*.

overtly economic development objectives pursued in creative cluster and class policies”.⁷⁴ According to Malcom Miles, the origins of this double argument have to be found in the 1980s, when “public art agencies began to lobby [...] for art as a driver of urban renewal [...] as a solution to the problems of inner-city decline, or a means to revive zones of de-industrialisation” with the result that “[a]rt’s expediency is now regarded by most city management as a norm”.⁷⁵ This argument was central to the cultural and urban policies developed in the 1990s by the newly elected New Labour, which critics have defined a “new social-cum-cultural policy imperative”⁷⁶ which prompted very strong critiques and debates in the fields of contemporary art theory and socially-engaged practices on the instrumentalisation of art and cultural activities for social development.⁷⁷ In what ways do these discourses of urban development inform the narratives of temporary vacant space reuse produced by practitioners and commentators?

It is important to ask to what extent the combination of ‘creative cities’ place marketing and the regeneration discourse function as an all-pervasive frame for the co-option of urban practices. In order to inhabit this analysis and understand the position of practitioners working within and against these discourses, it is crucial to approach these scripts as sets of differing visions with specific material manifestations rather than as a homogeneous one-dimensional and overarching theory. As an entry point to what seems an impenetrable hegemony, it is therefore be useful to ask: what motivates artists (and other cultural producers) to participate in such discourses and practices?⁷⁸ To address this question it is crucial to attend to the geographically specific ways in which these sets of discourses inform and produce a certain type of relationship between cultural practitioners and urban vacant spaces. In particular, it is important to analyse how pre-2008 credit crisis policies and imaginaries of creative urban development were translated into recessionary Britain,

⁷⁴ Bain, A. 2010: Creative Suburbs: Cultural ‘Popcorn’ Pioneering in Multi-purpose Spaces. In Edensor et al, *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity*, pp. 63-74.

⁷⁵ Miles, M. 2009: Airing Dirty Laundry in Public Art. *Mute Magazine*, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/airing-dirty-laundry-public-art> [accessed 5th May 2012].

⁷⁶ Evans, Creative spaces and the art of urban living, p. 21.

⁷⁷ See for instance the critiques published by the magazine and online platform *Mute Magazine* and the already mentioned 2009 book *No room to move: radical art and the regenerated city*. London: Mute, edited by Josephine Berry-Slater and Anthony Iles. For a Europe-wide critique, see also Breznik, M., 2008: The role of culture in the strategies of urban regeneration. In *Huizen in transformatie: interventies in Europese gentrification*. Rotterdam: NAI.

⁷⁸ Berry-Slater, J. and Anthony, I., 2009: *No room to move: radical art and the regenerated city*. London: Mute, p. 23.

and how the ‘austerity’ measures implemented since the 2010 election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in the UK has impacted on the availability of public resources and support that were central to their dissemination. In what ways has the entrepreneurial and interventionist narrative of regeneration been translated into the urban austerity discourse? Have the changed social and economic landscape brought a new awareness of the limits to the creative city?⁷⁹ How are practitioners involved in temporary reuse expected to transform the ‘abandoned movie set’ back into an attractive ‘vibrant’ and creative city?

The nexus between vacant spaces and alternative practices

Having mapped the traditions of critical activist and artistic practices in urban spaces and having briefly outlined the histories and performative dimension of neoliberal discourses of ‘creative cities’ and culture-led regeneration, and before I set out the conceptual issues that underpin my research into temporary vacant space reuse in contemporary London, it is useful to reflect on the conceptual blind spot that characterises the imaginary of vacant space reuse as spaces of exception. As has been argued in the first part of this chapter, to critical practitioners and activists engaging with urban issues, vacant spaces are both a condition and co-constituent element in their practices. The conceptual association between the siting of a practice and the practice itself plays an important role in the imaginary and representations of such practices, which often poetically conflate the two into an imaginary of alterity, of ‘other than’ the urban as lived, perceived, conceived, and understood. The alterity of the vacant space is articulated both spatially and temporally: vacant sites become time-spaces of exception where everyday urban socio-economic dynamics and temporalities are suspended.

From this understanding of the nexus between vacant spaces and short-term uses as time-space coordinates of alterity, comes the understanding that temporary vacant spaces are spaces of alternative and autonomous experimentation par excellence, be it artistic or political. The presumed spatio-temporal marginality of the site in relation to socio-economic urban dynamics is discursively conflated with the positive marginality of alternatives practices. An apparently indissoluble

⁷⁹ Harris, A. and Moreno, L. 2012: *Creative City Limits: Urban Cultural Economy in a New Era of Austerity*. London: UCL.

connection has thus come to be formed in the collective imaginary between vacant spaces as ‘still available’ urban sites and their political and artistic potential, as visible in recent literature on temporary urban practices taking spaces as a starting point to draw together different sets of practices. The focus on ‘vernacular’ “alternative, marginal, and quotidian creative practices”⁸⁰ that are allegedly omitted from mainstream accounts of urban creativity, draws attention to “those *interstitial spaces* that permeate the city but are so often seen as devoid of value”⁸¹, such as the space underneath flyovers and industrial ruins.⁸² A range of neologisms and spatial concepts have been recently associated with informal appropriation, critical urban performances and temporary public spaces; as recently reviewed by Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor, these are ‘edgelands’, ‘places on the margin’, ‘terrain vague’, ‘dead zones’, ‘anxious landscapes’, ‘parafunctional space’, ‘voids’, ‘indeterminate spaces’, ‘found spaces’, ‘ambivalent landscapes’, ‘drosscapes’, ‘loose spaces’ and ‘urban interstices’.⁸³

A similar discourse of alterity is visible in more recent discussions surrounding the urban practices analysed in the already mentioned *Urban/Act* handbook as well as in a special issue of the French journal *Multitude* on urban action and the micro-politics of cities, where projects of temporary urban appropriation are described as forms of *agir interstitiel* or interstitial acting.⁸⁴ The idea of interstitial acting refers directly to the notion of abandoned spaces as interstitial and residual argued in the *Manifeste du Tiers Paysage* (Manifesto of the Third Landscape) by the French agronomist and landscape theorist Gilles Clément.⁸⁵ In Clément’s taxonomy of residual and interstitial spaces, vacant spaces are understood as physical and temporal disruptions in homogenised and homogenising dynamics, and are identified as zones where ‘diverse’ social relations can occur. The ‘third landscape’ thus designates “a space that neither is the expression of a

⁸⁰ Edensor, T., Leslie, D., Millington, S. and Rantisi, N. (eds) 2010: *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy*, London: Routledge, p. 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸² Edensor, T. 2005: *Industrial ruins: spaces, aesthetics, and materiality*. Oxford: Berg.

⁸³ DeSilvey, C. and Edensor, T. 2013: Reckoning with ruins. *Progress in Human Geography*, 37, 4, pp. 465-485.

⁸⁴ AAA/PEPRAV (eds) 2007: *Urban/Act: a Handbook for Alternative Practice*. Montrouge: PEPRAV, p. 142. See in particular Petcou, C. and D. Petrescu, 2008, ‘Agire l’espace’, *Multitudes*, 31, pp. 101-114 and Nicolas-Le Strat, P. 2008: Multiplicité interstitielle. *Multitudes* 31, pp. 115-121.

⁸⁵ Clément, G. 2004 (2005): *Manifesto del Terzo Paesaggio*. Macerata: Quodlibet.

dominating power nor it is subjected to it”⁸⁶, a space of relative autonomy, echoing Bey’s definitions of Temporary Autonomous Zone discussed previously.

In the context of my investigation into temporary vacant space reuse as a form of urban action the notion of *interstitiality* raises a set of important issues and problematics. For urban practices involved in forms of social and political action, vacant spaces become *the* spaces for re-appropriation and not only for practical reasons or simply as a result of the cultural legacy of the countercultural urban imaginaries explored in the first half of this chapter. There seems to be a clear association between the idea of interstitial practices and the physical reality of an abandoned space perceived as a ‘gap’ or a ‘crack’, an area whose organised social function and economic dynamics have been temporarily suspended. This mapping of a concept over a physical space opens practices of temporary reuse to many expectations and assumptions, which, as discussed in Chapter 3, can be extremely problematic. In the construction of an imaginary of temporary empty spaces as inherently exceptional, the (alleged) exceptionality and alterity of the practices profits from the (alleged) marginality of the sites.

The production of imaginaries of emptiness and vacancy as marginal and exceptional within an otherwise smooth and homogeneous urban landscape has been seen by critical urban theorists as intrinsic to the production of a normative discourse of urban development that naturalises dynamics of gentrification.⁸⁷ As argued by Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan in their seminal ‘The Fine Art of Gentrification’, the dominant narratives about the relationship between artists and vacant spaces is often one of “pioneering” overlooked uninhabited land for the extraction of (symbolic) value. In this way, art projects and spaces are assigned a complacent and flattering role in the construction of the myth of spatial emptiness and worthlessness.⁸⁸ This leads to the question of how does the cultural construction of vacant spaces as alternative and interstitial relate to dominant imaginaries of the city and to the material processes that produce urban vacancy?

⁸⁶ Clément, *Manifesto del Terzo Paesaggio* (my translation), p. 11.

⁸⁷ Lees, L., Slater, T. and Wyly, E.K. 2008: *Gentrification*. London: Routledge.

⁸⁸ Deutsche and Ryan have called for cultural practitioners to clearly define their position in relation to urban dynamics of gentrification and displacement “to avoid aligning ourselves with the forces behind this destruction”. Deutsche, R. and Ryan, C.G. 1984: The Fine Art of Gentrification. *October* 31, p. 94.

Moreover, by the mid 2000s the marginal quality of interstitial acting had made its appearance into mainstream architectural and urban planning discourse⁸⁹, and with the 2008 global credit crisis ideas of temporary reuse has begun to be heralded as creative solutions to vacant buildings and stalled developments across cities in advanced capitalist countries.⁹⁰ The imaginary of crisis-induced exceptionality discussed earlier in relation to 1970s New York is thus mobilised once again in the radically transformed context of global financial crisis and its social, economic and cultural local repercussions.⁹¹ Returning to a situated approach to new forms of urban action between artistic and activist strategies of reuse, I want to ask to what extent are these narratives of exceptionality and crisis conceived by practitioners on the ground? How to attend to the critical potential of temporary reuse without a simplistic association between vacant space and alterity, but also without succumbing to a totalising narrative of crisis-induced neoliberal urbanism?

Power entanglements

The questions above outline ways of interrogating the potentials and limitations of practices of temporary vacant space reuse as forms of urban action. By critically examining the discursive construction of exceptionality and interstitial action, I am drawing attention to the fundamental political question of the tension between a potential for collective and individual action through strategies of spatial appropriation and the constraints posed by existing economic urban dynamics and political agendas. In long-standing debate on the relationship between cultural practitioners and urban dynamics claims to autonomy have been critiqued for reproducing a 'self-serving myth of independence'⁹² of artistic practices from social and economic dynamics that leaves little scope for examining the concrete and

⁸⁹ Through publications such as the influential and oft-cited Haydn, F. and Temel, R. 2006: *Temporary urban spaces: concepts for the use of city spaces*. Basel: Birkhäuser; and Studio Urban Catalyst/ Klaus Overmeyer 2007: *Urban Pioneers. Temporary Use and Urban Development in Berlin*. Berlin: Jovis Verlag.

⁹⁰ See for instance Bishop, P. and Williams, L. 2012: *The Temporary City*. London: Routledge. See also the references and blog entries collected on the website *Temporary Mobile Everlasting*, <http://temporary-mobile-everlasting.com/> [accessed 11th September 2012].

⁹¹ Critical attempts to rethink cultural production in the new context of austerity produced debates and conversations, such as the 'Recessional Aesthetics' debate between 2009 and 2011, see Bois, Y.-A., Foster, H. and Joselit, D. et al. 2011: Recessional Aesthetics: An Exchange. *October*, 135, pp. 93-116.

⁹² Antonio Gramsci quoted by Deutsche, R. and Ryan, C.G. 1984: The Fine Art of Gentrification. *October* 31, p. 102.

contingent politics of symbolic and practical intervention. In a similar vein, social movements' theorists have warned of the risk of ideas of urban autonomy contributing to the paradox of social centres as countercultural ghettos, catering for a self-selected minority of urban population and in so doing marginalising their potential impact on broader urban issues.⁹³

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the central political concern of my research relate to the transformative potential of spatial re-appropriation as an emancipatory form of 'power to' through its embodiment of a logic of use against one of exchange value. If "there are no completely autonomous spaces from which, and within which, collective action takes place"⁹⁴, then the power of use value in relation to neoliberalising urban dynamics cannot be postulated as intrinsically autonomous. Questioning the 'romance of resistance' of pitting use value as intrinsically oppositional to exchange value means to open up space to examine, in Matthew Sparke's words, "the messy middle grounds where control and opposition, structure and agency, hegemony and counter-hegemonic action, are all variously mediated".⁹⁵ The broad systemic understandings of cities that identify the 'dominating powers' with those urban agents that discipline and control urban dynamics often fail to address the power mobilised by urban agents that appear more marginal. In addition, the duality between domination and resistance is often unhelpful to address power as a relational dynamic that connects urban actors according to varying compositions. The question of the autonomy of political and artistic practices of temporary reuse is therefore an issue that concerns contemporary urban geographies of power and resistance, and which demands engaging with nuanced theorisations of power relations.

The couplet domination/resistance has been problematised by Jo Sharp *et al.* who have argued for an understanding of the siting of conflict in relation to both the practices of the everyday life and the socio-political processes of the state as one of perpetual movement, negotiation, changing alliances and affinities, co-options and

⁹³ As debated by Hodkinson, S. and Chatterton, P. 2006: Autonomy in the city? Reflections on the social centres movement in the UK. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 10, pp. 305-315.

⁹⁴ Sharp, J.P., Routledge, P., Philo, C. and Paddison, R. 2000: *Entanglements of power: geographies of domination/resistance*. London: Routledge, pp. 10-11.

⁹⁵ Sparke, M., 2008: Political geography – political geographies of globalization III: resistance. *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (3), p. 423.

infiltration, contingent upon the particularities of spatio-temporal conditions.⁹⁶ In this framework, following a Foucauldian approach, power is conceived as “having both positive and negative dimensions, operating in ways which can be repressive and progressive, constraining and facilitative, to be condemned and to be celebrated”.⁹⁷ As power circulates between subjects, it has to be understood in its specific socio-spatial configurations and articulations. As discussed by Stuart Elden and Jeremy W. Crampton, the reflection on the heterogeneity of power is what enables Foucault to identify its positivities as contingent upon specific time spaces, since the spatialities of power are overlapping and discontinuous.⁹⁸

This framework is crucial to identify emancipatory and ‘resisting’ elements of these practices as well as their ‘dominating’ characteristics, and an attention to the shifting negotiations, affinities and particularities, as well as to the changing degrees of awareness of practitioners, without postulating them as intrinsically ‘other’ to existing urban dynamics. By attending to the ‘entanglements of power’ of temporary vacant space reuse in contemporary cities, my research into practices of temporary reuse analyses the often strategic positioning of practitioners in relation to dominating discourse, their ambiguous mobilisation of apparently contradictory discourses and imaginaries, and the dynamism and fluidity that characterises complex moments of negotiation, access and use in relation to a range of specific spatialities of urban powers.

In order to examine the claims to alterity of practices of reuse, it is important to understand the material dimensions of their coming into being: the social, economic and spatial articulations that constitute their *use*, their relationship to existing urban dynamics and the relationships they engender in specific locales. In the second half of this chapter I therefore outline in greater detail the range of conceptual issues that underpin my analysis of the alterity of temporary practices of vacant shop front in contemporary London. I begin by discussing the relationship between temporary reuse, vacant spaces and dynamics of gentrification, moving on to questions of entrepreneurial approaches to space, flexible labour and diverse economies, and finally addressing the question of the experiential urban economies and performative intensities engendered by practices of temporary vacant shop reuse.

⁹⁶ Sharp et al. *Entanglements of power*, p. 11.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹⁸ Foucault, M, 2007 (1976): *The Meshes of Power*, cited in Crampton, J.W. and Elden, S. (eds) *Space, knowledge and power: Foucault and geography*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Vacant spaces as the temporal frontier of gentrification

The first critical entry point into the alterity of temporary reuse is a materialist critique of the multiple and interconnected economic, political and social dynamics that produce urban vacancy. In a Marxian interpretative framework, the existence of vacant spaces is considered as the visible materialisation of uneven urban development generating an urban landscape that is always affected by the dynamic tension between investment and disinvestment since the commodification of space and the construction of its exchange value demand enforced urban scarcity.⁹⁹ From this angle, in a context of advanced urban development, the presence of vacant spaces can be seen as symptomatic of direct or indirect displacement caused by dynamics of residential or commercial gentrification.

Recent debates favouring an expanded definition of gentrification in the inner city have pointed at the impact of redevelopment plans as processes of new-build gentrification, that is, of gentrification through the development of new constructions either through processes of creative destruction, or *ex novo*.¹⁰⁰ As “real-estate development becomes a centrepiece of the city’s *productive* economy”¹⁰¹, public support for constant urban redevelopment is increasingly justified as an end in itself by appeals to job creation, increase in tax revenues and tourism. This focus on constant redevelopment is symptomatic of what Neil Smith has called the ‘new global urban strategy’ of neoliberal urbanism.¹⁰²

Drawing upon debates on the global rescaling of functions and relations, Smith has called for a redefinition of urban space in relation to an unprecedented generalisation of gentrification strategies, both ‘vertically’, descending the “urban hierarchy” from traditional global cities to smaller urban centres across the world, and ‘horizontally’, extending beyond the geographies of old capitalist urban areas.¹⁰³ He suggests that many contemporary cities may be now experiencing a wave of

⁹⁹ This is the case in the classical interpretation of gentrifying processes through the ‘rent gap’ theory, where the decay and abandonment of properties and entire neighbourhoods is seen as necessary in order to enable high returns for re-investment in the area. Smith, N. 1996: *The new urban frontier: gentrification and the revanchist city*. London: Routledge. See also Till, J. 2011: Constructed scarcity (working paper). London: Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment (SCIBE).

¹⁰⁰ Lees, L., Slater, T. and Wyly, E.K. 2008: *Gentrification*. London: Routledge. See also Davidson, M. and Lees L. 2005: New-build ‘gentrification’ and London’s riverside renaissance, *Environment and Planning A* 37(7), pp. 1165–1190.

¹⁰¹ Smith, N. 2002: New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy. *Antipode* 34, p. 443.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 439.

generalised gentrification as the “vehicle for transforming whole areas into new landscape complexes that pioneer a comprehensive class-inflected urban remake”.¹⁰⁴ Gentrification as a global urban strategy is thus seen as a generalised blueprint fuelled by vast amounts of liquidity produced through financial transactions in need for a ‘spatial fix’.¹⁰⁵

Once the logic of gentrification is generalised and assumed as an urban policy on a national and trans-national scale, the valorisation of vacant spaces becomes only one element in a broader dynamic of constant revaluation of the urban built environment. In the UK, this shift in urban agendas and policies is often associated with the publication of the Urban Task Force Report in 1999, considered the regeneration manifesto.¹⁰⁶ One of the implications of the report was its stress on the redevelopment of so-called ‘brownfield’ areas, in other words urban land that has already been subjected to one or more cycles of development. Naming land and property as ‘brownfield’ implied a redefinition of the notion of urban decay, and an acceleration of the temporalities according to which residential and commercial properties are perceived and described as in need for redevelopment. In other words, following a logic of new-build gentrification and urban redevelopment agendas, since the mid 1990s the production of vacancy can be interpreted as a temporary step in a wave of ever-increasing displacement and redevelopment.

While this argument is convincing to discuss and analyse urban dynamics at a time of exceptional growth of the real estate sector and of state-led regeneration schemes, is this framework equally useful to address the recessionary urban landscape after the financial crisis of 2008? The specificities of London’s regeneration have been identified by several urban scholars, who have argued that any analysis of the city’s dynamics “has to be set, and understood, within the broadcloth of international relations and transnational processes relating to the capital’s position as a global city and as a pre-eminent player in the global economy”.¹⁰⁷ As the geographies of regeneration and new-build gentrification developed differently across England and the UK, contingent upon differential real estate markets and public and private investment priorities, the effects of the recession can be expected to be equally

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *New Globalism*, p. 443.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. See also: Harvey, D. 1982: *The limits to capital*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

¹⁰⁶ DETR 1999: *Towards an Urban Renaissance: Final Report of the Urban Task Force UK*. London: HMSO. See also Imrie, R., Lees, L. and Raco, M. 2009: *Regenerating London: governance, sustainability and community in a global city*. London: Routledge.

¹⁰⁷ Imrie, Raco and Lees, *Regenerating London*, p. 4.

geographically uneven. In other words, it is necessary to distinguish between nation-wide discourses around urban decay and the economic recession, and their London-specific histories and implementations, particularly as an increasing body of gentrification literature evidences the impact of global dynamics of real estate investment in the ‘super-gentrification’ of the inner boroughs.¹⁰⁸ What are the temporal and economic conditions of urban vacancy in London? How do they differ across boroughs? Which practices of temporary vacant shop reuse are encouraged and what purpose do they serve in the urban development of specific urban locales? What is the relationship between dynamics of vacancy and redevelopment, and short-term reuse?

The DiY entrepreneurial ‘mystique’

The second issue addressed in my analysis of the alterity of temporary urban reuse concerns the labour required to reuse vacant shop fronts, its characteristics and implications for thinking about the profile of practitioners and participants involved in similar projects. Narratives of temporary practices of reuse often combine a blend of direct action and do-it-yourself attitude, and the entrepreneurial values of self-employment and self-organisation. In contexts of artistic and cultural production, self-organised projects are often celebrated as sites of innovation and experimentation, and are seen by practitioners almost as a *de facto* proof of the radical intent of the practice.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, in the tradition of social centres, self-organisation, ‘self-production’, self-financing and DiY attitudes are central to practices of spatial re-appropriation, and the professed autonomy is often portrayed as a prefigurative way of practicing forms of collective and horizontal decision-making and direct action.¹¹⁰

Within the broader societal shift towards self-employment and flexible labour of the last three decades, however, self-organisation can be seen as perfectly fitting the neoliberal mode of production in which all uncertainties and responsibilities are

¹⁰⁸ Butler, T. and Lees, L. 2006: Super-gentrification in Barnsbury, London: globalization and gentrifying global elites at the neighbourhood level. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31, pp. 467-487.

¹⁰⁹ As discussed in Chapter 3, see ‘Towards a Zoology of Space’ panel discussion on alternative self-organised not-for-profit spaces at AutoItalia, 16th January 2010.

¹¹⁰ Dilleuth, S., Davies, A. and Jakobsen, J. 2007: There is no alternative: the future is self-organised. In Bradley and Esche, *Art and social change*, pp. 378-382.

externalised on independent (freelance, short-term) worker.¹¹¹ Investigating the UK's 'creative class', sociologist Angela McRobbie has identified the mid 1990s as the pivotal moment when the cultural sector began to be characterised by de-specialised cultural entrepreneurs (or entrepreneurs of the self) who operate in a networked free market environment.¹¹² In her interpretative framework, cultural practitioners increasingly constitute themselves as their own infrastructure by creating their own job market, workspaces, projects and networks from very little or from nothing at all.¹¹³ In the 'creative' rhetoric of freelance urban cultural projects, the distinction between notions of self-organisation and entrepreneurship is often unclear, as flexible practitioners become the ideal figures to engage in self-organised short-term re-use of vacant spaces through that 'entrepreneurial' spirit that has come to redefine the role of the artist in relation to dynamics of urban redevelopment.¹¹⁴

Sociologist Paul Armstrong has analysed the propagation of 'enterprise discourse' in the United Kingdom, and its permeation of social, cultural and urban policy since the late 1970s.¹¹⁵ He argues that it is a central neoliberal discourse¹¹⁶ rooted in a strong binary opposition: "on the side of freedom and prosperity are the qualities of enterprise, initiative, self-reliance and their outward manifestation, entrepreneurship. Ranged against them, but about to be swept aside, are the evils of

¹¹¹ Gill, R. and Pratt, A. 2008: In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work. *Theory Culture Society* 25, pp. 1-30.

¹¹² McRobbie, A. 2002: 'Everyone is creative'. Artists as pioneers of the New Economy? , *Be Creative!*, www.k3000.ch/becreative/texts/text_5.html [accessed 8th May 2010]. See also Armstrong's reflections on the discrepancy between the celebration of the rise of self-employment in 1980s Britain and the ethnographic evidence produced by MacDonald (1996), and Storey and Strange (1992) "who did the ethnography and found a grinding struggle to make ends meet", in Armstrong, P. 2005: *Critique of entrepreneurship: people and policy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 43.

¹¹³ Banks has noted, for instance, cultural workers are often "involved in myriad and complex struggles to carve out leisure time-space, beyond the grasp of work, and where, even amongst the creative class, there is significant disquiet regarding the decline of disinterested leisure and some deep-felt anxiety regarding the creeping colonisation of the self by work and economic rationality", in Banks, M. 2009: Fit and working again? The instrumental leisure of the 'creative class'. *Environment and Planning A* 41, p. 679. See also Gill, R. 2002: Cool, Creative and Egalitarian? Exploring Gender in Project-Based New Media Work in Europe. *Information, Communication & Society* 5, pp. 70-89.

¹¹⁴ Edensor, T., Leslie, D., Millington, S. and Rantisi, N. (eds) 2010: *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy*, London: Routledge, p. 4. See also Neff, G., Wissinger, E. and Zukin, S. 2005: Entrepreneurial Labor among Cultural Producers: 'Cool' Jobs in 'Hot' Industries. *Social Semiotics* 15, pp. 307-334.

¹¹⁵ Armstrong, P. 2005: *Critique of entrepreneurship: people and policy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 9.

¹¹⁶ Harvey, D. 1989: From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: the Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler* 71, pp. 3-17. See also Thrift, N. 2001: 'It's the romance, not the finance, that makes the business worth pursuing': disclosing a new market culture. *Economy and Society* 30, pp. 412-432.

progressive taxation, government control and welfarism”.¹¹⁷ According to Armstrong, this binary enables proponents of this discourse to maintain a degree of mystery around the internal workings of enterprise, which he calls the ‘entrepreneurial mystique’, diverting any concrete assessment of the economic and social effects of entrepreneurial policies and ideas.¹¹⁸ Moreover, those subjected to entrepreneurial policies and their accompanying discourse often find themselves seduced by the normalisation of the idea of enterprise as “a natural expression of the human spirit” whose “absence is always due to its suppression, either by hostile systems of ideas, by regulative restriction or by a denial of the material upon which it can operate”.¹¹⁹ Critiques of the entrepreneurial undertones of self-organised practices are thus faced with a defence of this normalisation, which mystifies the material conditions for practices to come into being and be sustainable.

In my research, the ambiguity of the normalisation of entrepreneurial attitudes is analysed through a cultural materialist approach. Presented with increasing evidence of contemporary urban pressures on the provision of affordable living and work space¹²⁰, and of the increasing reliance of self-organised activist and artistic spaces on a range of funding sources and on unrelated work¹²¹, in my research I focused on the tensions between the idealised imaginings of temporary reuse practitioners as flexible and entrepreneurial subjects, and their labour conditions and “power relations, discipline and risks”.¹²² By paying attention to the

¹¹⁷ Armstrong, *Critique of entrepreneurship*, p. 41.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 148.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ In this regard, hypotheses have been put forward to identify the displacement of urban inhabitants through processes of gentrification as one of the causes for the decline of critical cultural production and political urban struggles in contemporary global cities. See Lees, L., Slater, T. and Wyly, E.K. 2008: *Gentrification*. London: Routledge, p. 249.

¹²¹ The reliance of the art and cultural sector on other productive sectors, such as the service industry, is a well-known practice, acknowledged both by official national surveys, see for instance Oakley, K., Sperry, B. and Pratt, A. 2008: *The art of innovation: how fine art graduates contribute to innovation*. London: NESTA. See also the work of the art/activist group Carrot Workers Collective 2011: *Surviving internships. A counter guide to free labour in the arts*. London: CWC. For social centres and other radical spaces across Europe the issue of sustainability has led to contested debates on the acceptability of finding monetised capitalist forms of ownership and usage, such as rent or mortgage, to make the use of the space more sustainable. These forms of compromise have led a section of the movement to accuse these spaces of being transformed into ‘social enterprises’ that divert ‘a huge investment of activist time, energy and resources away from the real fight for public space –squatting– to an ‘essentially non-radical and liberal project’ built upon compromise, constrained by legal hurdles and enshrined in unnecessary bureaucracy’. Hodkinson and Chatterton, *Autonomy in the city*, p. 313; See also Montagna, *The de-commodification of urban space and the occupied social centres in Italy*.

¹²² Edensor, T., Leslie, D., Millington, S. and Rantisi, N. (eds) 2010: *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy*, London: Routledge, p. 5

narratives mobilised by local authorities' temporary schemes and by practitioners, I discuss the complex overlapping of direct action values and urban entrepreneurialism, and their implications for the awareness of their material conditions. Returning to the questions of power and autonomy, the celebration of the creative entrepreneurial subjects has been analysed by critical commentators as a contemporary form of governmentality.¹²³ A Foucauldian governmentality angle enables to grasp the rhetoric of entrepreneurialism¹²⁴ as a technique of self-governance, through which cultural practitioners rationalise and interiorise unfair labour conditions and a more existential state of uncertainty as 'normal'. To what extent are practices of temporary vacant shop reuse portrayed as entrepreneurial? Do practitioners challenge these urban entrepreneurial narratives? What are the implications for activists and practitioners who reclaim spaces for social activities?

Flexibility, precarity and neo-bohemianism

The possibility of an entrepreneurial approach to temporary vacant space reuse is predicated upon practitioners' and activists' availability through flexible working and living arrangements. As noted by Brian Holmes, the notion of 'flexibility' points both to job casualisation as well as to an "entire set of very positive images, spontaneity, creativity, cooperativity, mobility, peer relations, appreciation of difference, openness to present experience".¹²⁵ Several cultural commentators have argued that the rise of flexible labour was partly the product of the demands and modes of self-organisation of counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, however "caught in the distorting mirror of a new hegemony".¹²⁶ Instead of promoting alternative work and lifestyles, self-organisation, irregular working patterns, the blurring of life and work, and the lack of a fixed work place have become central to contemporary neoliberal urban dynamics. As described by

¹²³ Lorey, I. 2006: Governmentality and Self-Precarization. On the normalization of cultural producers. *Transversal*, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en> [accessed 22nd June 2012].

¹²⁴ Paul Armstrong uses the term 'entrepreneurialism' "to signify that the promotion of entrepreneurship is, above all, *policy* [...] a policy which emerged from a particular version of capitalist ideology embraced by a small caucus within the Conservative party [in the UK] prior to the 1979 Election". Armstrong, *Critique of entrepreneurship*, p. 9.

¹²⁵ Holmes, B. 2002: The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique. *Transversal*, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en> [accessed 13th February 2012]. See also Holmes, B. 2007: *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms*. Autonomedia: New York.

¹²⁶ Holmes, The Flexible Personality.

Holmes: “deeper and perhaps more insidious effects arise from the inscription of cultural, artistic and ethical ideals, once valued for their permanence, into the swiftly changing cycles of capitalist valorisation and obsolescence”.¹²⁷ The reach of this inscription from a marginal critique to a societal project has been analysed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello who have called it ‘the new spirit of capitalism’.¹²⁸

In the course of my analysis I critically address the ‘mystique’ of entrepreneurialism and flexibility and deploy a cultural materialist approach to identify and analyse the material conditions of temporary practices of spatial reuse. To do so, I have drawn on debates on the political concepts of precarity and precarious labour, as developed by autonomous Marxist reflections on post-Fordist work and self-organisation.¹²⁹ In these debates cultural practitioners have been heralded as paradigmatic post-Fordist precarious workers, and the notion of precarity has become a useful theoretical tool for research in the cultural and creative sector in the United Kingdom.¹³⁰ A recent empirical study by Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt has defined contemporary ‘creative’ work in the UK as characterised by:

a preponderance of temporary, intermittent and precarious jobs; long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play; poor pay; high levels of mobility; passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourers [...]; an attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and ‘keeping up’ in rapidly changing fields.¹³¹

In other words, the common experience of cultural practitioners in contemporary Britain seems to be marked by instability, mobility and poorly paid but labour

¹²⁷ Holmes, The Flexible Personality.

¹²⁸ Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. 2005: *The new spirit of capitalism*. London: Verso.

¹²⁹ Berardi, F. 2009: *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of Post-Alpha Generation*. London: Autonomedia; Neilson, B. and Rossiter, N. 2008: Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception. *Theory, Culture and Society* 25, pp. 51-72. For a discussion on the potential implications for the concept in geographical literature, see Waite, L. 2009: A Place and Space for a Critical Geography of Precarity?. *Geography Compass* 3 (1), pp. 412-433.

¹³⁰ McRobbie, A. 2007: The Los Angelisation of London: Three Short-waves of Young People's Micro-economies of Culture and Creativity in the UK. *Transversal*, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0207/mcrobbe/en> [accessed 11th January 2012]. See also McRobbie, A. 2004: Making a Living as a Visual Artists in London's Small Scale Creative Economy. In Power, D. and Scott, A.J. (eds) *Cultural industries and the production of culture*, London: Routledge; and Mute, (ed.) 2005: *Precarious Reader*. London: Mute Publishing.

¹³¹ Gill, R. and Pratt, A. 2008: In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work. *Theory, Culture and Society* 25, p. 14.

intensive temporary jobs, and by a constant need for networking and work-related socialising.

The ‘blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism’ that the authors find in the UK, echoes sociologist Richard Lloyd’s analysis of creative work in the United States, for which he coined the concept of ‘neo-bohemianism’.¹³² Despite the fact that the field of cultural production has generally been understood as operating on a reversal of mainstream economic rationale,¹³³ for Lloyd the novelty of ‘neo-bohemia’ lies in the new social and economic context in which cultural work takes place, and especially its urban implications, given that “the cultural marketplace is no longer the only, or even the primary, way that the new bohemia intersects with the urban economy”.¹³⁴ Neo-bohemian urban practitioners are found to make a virtue of marginality, drawing on traditional imaginaries of intellectual and artistic disinterestedness, in an urban world constructed on creative value and interurban competition.¹³⁵ To what extent are practitioners’ claims to alterity a form of internalised compliance with neo-bohemian imaginaries? Can forms of temporary vacant space reuse be understood as exemplary of dominant forms of the precarity of cultural labour?

Diverse economies and projective logic

The entrepreneurial dimension of practices of vacant space reuse needs to be critically compared to new forms of management and to the ways in which neoliberal economies have become increasingly reliant upon flexible, short-term labour force, and in which urban strategies have been preferring short-term fixes to long-term plans. The deterritorialisation of production and the lack of continuity in the work experience have been analysed by Boltanski and Chiapello who discuss new practices and imaginaries of reticular organisation that have permeated all realms of work and life over the last four decades. As argued in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*:

¹³² Lloyd, R. 2004: The Neighbourhood in Cultural Production: Material and Symbolic Resources in the New Bohemia. *City and Community* 3, pp. 343-372.

¹³³ Bourdieu, P. 1993: *The field of cultural production: essays on art and literature*: Polity Press.

¹³⁴ Lloyd, R.D. 2006: *Neo-Bohemia: art and commerce in the postindustrial city*. New York; London: Routledge, p. 243

¹³⁵ Ibid.

in a reticular world, social life is composed of a proliferation of encounters and temporary, but reactivatable connections with various groups, operated at potentially considerable social, professional, geographical and cultural distance. The *project* is the occasion and reason for the connection. It temporarily assembles a very disparate group of people, and presents itself as a *highly activated section of the network* for a period of time that is relatively short, but allows for the construction of more enduring links that will be put on hold while remaining available. Projects make production and accumulation possible in a world which, were it to be purely connexionist, would simply contain flows, where nothing could be stabilised, accumulated or crystallised. [...] it is thus a *pocket of accumulation* which, creating value, provides a base for the requirement of extending the network by furthering connections [emphasis in the original].¹³⁶

Boltanski and Chiapello understand the ‘projective city’ as a both a form of management and self-management of labour and sociability, and as a discursive system where certain meanings and justifications are given to the ways in which ‘projects’ and workers are valued. As will be discussed further in chapter 4, practices of temporary reuse can be seen as ‘projects’, and vacant spaces and their use become a highly activated section of many overlapping, intertwining networks. The temporariness and flexibility required by this ‘projective’ logic is often difficult to disassociate from the precarisation of labour previously discussed. As noted by theorist Franco Berardi, beside temporal implications, precarity is also characterised by the production of specific relations to space:

precarisation is the consequence of the deterritorialisation of all aspects of production. There is no continuity in the work experience [...] Therefore it is not possible to implement forms of permanent social organisation. Since labour became precarious thanks to a cellular and reticular transformation, the problem of the autonomous organisation of labour must be completely rethought.¹³⁷

If this precarious, reticular form of acting can be seen as a dominant form of urban living and working, then there is a strong urgency to rethink the problem of what would constitute an autonomous form of organisation, not only of labour but of all

¹³⁶ Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. 2005: *The new spirit of capitalism*. London: Verso, pp. 104-5.

¹³⁷ Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody*, p. 148.

aspects of social life. In this, the ‘projective’ element of temporary vacant space practices does not have to be interpreted as necessarily exploitative or compliant. Projective, temporary ‘power surges’¹³⁸ can be seen as adaptive ways of sourcing labour and spaces, and as ways of organising *despite* rather than because of processes of precarisation, relying on non-monetised exchanges and forms of diverse economies. Drawing inspiration from Gibson-Graham’s diagram of economic alternatives, it is possible to argue that cultural production in vacant spaces is far from being in any way “outside” dominant economic logics, inhabiting instead, in its many facets, diverse types of transaction, labour remuneration and enterprise: *alternative market, nonmarket, alternative paid, unpaid, alternative capitalist and non-capitalist*.¹³⁹ For example, a self-employed artist (classed by Gibson-Graham as alternative paid labour) may volunteer (unpaid labour) for a non-profit art organisation (alternative capitalist enterprise) that may receive funding through state grants for the arts (non-market transactions) such as the Arts Council’s *Art in Empty Spaces* scheme run in partnership with the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), or through other financial sources such as market-oriented capitalist enterprises. Moreover, the artist herself might be able to support this volunteering through informal economies or reciprocal labour, and similarly hybrid combinations of economic dynamics have been argued to be the norm for the majority of cultural practitioners.

In the case of occupied social centres, the spatial, social and economic arrangements that enable them to exist have been seen as prefigurative of non-capitalist modes of exchange as well as following political theories of solidarity economies and mutual aid.¹⁴⁰ It is widely argued that such claims have to be examined in relation to the power relations and labour distribution that concretely enable such spaces to exist, since, as observed by Hodkinson and Chatterton, “despite hundreds of people circulating through social centres each week, only a

¹³⁸ Bey, T.A.Z., p. 101.

¹³⁹ Following Gibson-Graham’s deconstruction of the discursive and material production of capitalist narrative, it is possible to be attentive to the non-monetised productive elements in contemporary urban economies and to show their implication in monetised capitalist forms of value production and exchange. See Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006 (1996): *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): a feminist critique of political economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. xiii.

¹⁴⁰ Pickerill, J. and Chatterton, P. 2006: Notes towards autonomous geographies: creation, resistance and self-management as survival tactics. *Progress in Human Geography* 30, pp. 730-746.

handful actually make that space happen, leading to burnout, resentment and inefficiency”.¹⁴¹

Therefore, my approach to the diverse economies and forms of organisation in practices of temporary vacant reuse does not consider these diverse modes of exchange as intrinsically resisting capitalist appropriation and exploitation. In Chapter 4 I position these ‘alternative’ exchanges in relation to the flexibilisation and precarisation of practitioners’ life and work. Doing so will enable examining the complexities of non-monetised empty space reuse and assessing the potentials and limitations of autonomous arrangements that rely on precarious networks. How are these practices sustained? Can their diverse economies be seen as alternative to dominant dynamics of urban economies? Can their precarious and reticular conditions become a resource?

Experiential economies

Until now I have formulated a set of questions that address the conditions of contemporary spatial practitioners engaging with the reuse of vacant spaces. I have focused on the production of urban vacancy and its discursive association with spaces and practices of marginality and alterity; these issues will inform my analysis of the field of temporary vacant space reuse in Chapter 3. I have also discussed power relations and the issue of labour and diverse economies that enable self-organised short-term practices to exist, which constitute the theoretical framework for Chapter 4. I am now interested to open up this debate to the public side of spatial practices of temporary re-appropriation, and to the audiences and participants they create and encounter. This involves shifting the attention from the spatial, social and economic dimension of these practices to the ways in which they can create spaces of open and public use. In the last part of this chapter, which lays the basis for Chapter 5, I therefore develop a framework sensitive to the lived experiences of producing publicness, to the circulation of powers through the ‘opening’ of spaces for social uses and to the encounters that take place through the occupation and opening of the sites.

¹⁴¹ Hodkinson, S. and Chatterton, P. 2006: Autonomy in the city? Reflections on the social centres movement in the UK. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 10, p. 312.

In recent years a whole range of debates has traversed cultural and activist spatial practices around the question of small-scale proximity and around the relationship between local issues and global urban dynamics. In such debates, *site-specific* spatial practices are sometimes conceptualised as able to produce ‘more authentic’ forms of interaction within increasingly socially fragmented cities. This interpretative framework dwells on the dichotomy between a nostalgic past characterised by ‘slower’, ‘closer’ and ‘more humane’ forms of urban living, and fast, remote and socially alienated cities.¹⁴² Amin and Thrift have discussed and challenged the implications of such a dichotomy in *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*¹⁴³ and argued that ‘the local’ should not be considered a priori as the ultimate refuge from globalised urban dynamics.¹⁴⁴

In order to address the lived experiences of publicness engendered by practices that appropriate vacant spaces for open social uses, it is necessary to examine carefully and critically the assumptions that face-to-face personal interactions give rise to ‘authentic’, autonomous and unmediated encounters, often implicit in celebrations of spatial appropriation. Returning to the critique of ‘creative cities’ policy outlined in the first half of this chapter, the presence of subcultural markers of authenticity is discussed by Jamie Peck as central to Richard Florida’s ‘creative city’ model, according to which successful creative cities are characterised by their ability to attract a class of ‘creative’ professionals who are allegedly drawn “(only) to cities with ‘buzz’, cities with a welcoming and sustaining ‘people climate’”.¹⁴⁵ In these accounts public and private bodies can encourage small scale and community-oriented ‘off-beat’ ‘alternative’ practices as markers of urban authenticity in a constant search for distinctive spaces and a “context of 24/7 experiential intensity [...] for face-to-face relations”.¹⁴⁶ How is the encouragement of

¹⁴² Marshall Berman has discussed how this dichotomy seems to be a trope of urban and social theory that predates global capitalist cities, see Berman, M. 1982: *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. New York: Penguin. For a critical engagement with debates about the theoretical assumptions of experiences of alienation and public encounters in the modern city, see also Watson, S. 2006: *City publics: the (dis)enchantments of urban encounters*. London: Routledge.

¹⁴³ Amin, A. and Thrift, N.J. 2002: *Cities: reimagining the urban*. Cambridge: Polity.

¹⁴⁴ See also Massey, D. 1994: *Space, Place and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁴⁵ Peck, J. 2011: Creative moments: working culture, through municipal socialism and neoliberal urbanism. In McCann, E. and Ward, K., editors, *Mobile urbanism: cities and policymaking in the global age*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 41.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 13; Peck comments how the ‘alternative’ broedplaatsen program in Amsterdam served as a marker of authenticity for the coordinated branding efforts of the city council, in Peck, J. 2011b: *Recreative City: Amsterdam, Vehicular Ideas and the Adaptive Spaces of Creativity Policy*. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, p. 15. See also Zukin, S. 2003: *Urban*

experiential intensity carried out in practice? Are practitioners inevitably complicit or are there possibilities for disrupting such processes of co-option?

It is useful in this respect to observe how the notions of urban experiences and experiential economies have been translated from 1990s marketing discourse to 2000s urban policy-makers.¹⁴⁷ Although rarely mentioned in geographical literature, the concept of ‘experience economy’ has been taken up in the fields of retail and of mainstream urban economics and planning and has been used to refer to new forms of marketing that involve personal and customised aesthetics, an ‘emotional-experiential marketing framework’, as defined by Joseph B. Pine and James H. Gilmore in their bestseller *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*.¹⁴⁸ In this context experiences are defined as “events that engage individuals in a personal way”¹⁴⁹ and the activities of marketing professionals as the *staging* of such experiences, through the careful arrangement and choreography of each detail and individual action. The ‘staged’ dimension of the resulting spaces of consumption has been the subject of much critical scholarship analysing the performative dimension of experiences of consumption, especially in the service sector.¹⁵⁰

While the idea of ‘staged experiences’ has made its way into urban policy discourse, its practical implementation on the ground remains more difficult to identify and study. An important theoretical interpretative frame is offered by recent debates in critical performing arts and their relationship to the performative production of space. In their analysis of Toronto’s contested creative urban

Lifestyles. Diversity and Standardisation in Spaces of Consumption. In Clarke, D.B., Doel, M.A. and Housiaux, K.M.L. (eds), *The Consumption Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 127-131.

¹⁴⁷ See Lorentzen, A. and Hansen, C.J. 2009: The Role and Transformation of the City in the Experience Economy: Identifying and Exploring Research Challenges. *European Planning Studies* 17, pp. 817-827. And Lorenzen, M., Scott, A.J. and Vang, J. 2008: Editorial: Geography and the Cultural Economy. *Journal of Economic Geography* 8, pp. 589-592. An exception is Pratt, A.C. 2009: Urban Regeneration: From the Arts ‘Feel Good’ Factor to the Cultural Economy: A Case Study of Hoxton, London. *Urban Studies* 46, pp. 1041-1061.

¹⁴⁸ Pine, B.J. and Gilmore, J.H. 1999: *The experience economy: work is theatre & every business a stage*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

¹⁴⁹ They coined the notion of ‘experiential economy’ to stress the moment of production of value after and beyond the service as a form or memory “the value of the experience lingers in the memory of any individual who was engaged by the event. Ibid., pp. 11-12.

¹⁵⁰ For instance, Crang, P. 1994: It’s showtime: on the workplace geographies of display in a restaurant in southeast England. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12, pp. 675-704. See also Hochschild, A.R. 2003: *The managed heart: commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley, California; London: University of California Press, and McDowell, L. and Court, G. 1994: Performing work: bodily representations in merchant banks. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12, pp. 727-750.

interventions, Laura Levin and Kim Solga have observed a growing “hyperawareness of ‘spectacle and theatricality’”¹⁵¹ in urban policy-making, and its ambiguous effects on participatory performance practices. Their arguments echo Heather McLean’s analysis, according to which interactive forms such as immersive theatre and participatory art practices, for instance, have increasingly been mobilised to promote distinct urban imaginaries through neighbourhood-scale interventions, as “[c]ity boosters, including business improvement area groups and planners, increasingly view neighbourhoods as spaces to encourage face-to-face interaction and experimentation in festivals and a range of artistic interventions”.¹⁵²

Such critical insights pose a particularly complex set of questions to temporary practices of vacant space reuse as many practitioners are unpaid or poorly paid, and thus the staging and performing of specific urban experiences may be less explicit than in the case of fully sponsored public art festival or projects. What kinds of urban experiences are produced through temporary reuse? Are they critical or compliant to mainstream urban imaginaries? Who are the audiences of the staged experiential economies of temporary reuse?

Performative public encounters

Turning to the public dimension of temporary practices of vacant space reuse, it is important to interrogate the potential of face-to-face public interaction in practices of vacant space reuse and their visual and embodied role in relation to symbolic and experiential economies of the city. The declared aspiration of appropriations of vacant shops for social uses places a particular stress on the ability and potential to attract and encourage the participation and use of the space by different communities. This leads temporary reuse practitioners to develop strategies of openness and facilitation, which involve the ‘staging’ of welcoming open spaces

¹⁵¹ Levin, L. and Solga, K. 2009: Building Utopia: Performance and the Fantasy of Urban Renewal in Contemporary Toronto. *TDR: The Drama Review* 53, p. 39.

¹⁵² McLean, H.E. 2010: The politics of creative performance in public space. Towards a critical geography of Toronto case studies. In Edensor, T., Leslie, D., Millington, S. and Rantisi, N. (eds) 2010: *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy*, London: Routledge, p. 207. In the UK, a recent ambiguous instance of the tight connection between immersive theatre and experiential rebranding was the widely acclaimed independent British theatre company Punchdrunk. The company was commissioned by Stella Artois to perform an immersive theatre-marketing show in East London between July and September 2011 to promote a new beer. For a critique of this commission, see Alston, A. 2012: Funding, product placement and drunkenness in Punchdrunk's *The Black Diamond*. *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 32, pp. 193-208.

and of moments of promotion and explanation, particularly in the case of practices that intend to engage with communities beyond the artist or activist scenes. To what extent are encounters staged? Is there space for unexpected interactions?

In the context of increased theatricality and harnessing of urban participation, there is an important ambiguity to be addressed in the spatial appropriation of vacant spaces and in the politics of face-to-face encounters taking place through 'alternative' experiences of reuse. In order to unfold this ambiguity, in Chapter 5 I will analyse small-scale community-oriented practices of reuse through an attention to key urban players in specific locales, their rationales and imagined audiences, as well as through an appreciation for the critical strategies of engagement and performance. To do so, I draw on a performative framework to critically analyse the visual cues, ways of interpellation, modes of interaction, behaviours and frictions generated by performances of reuse. Practices of temporary vacant space reuse take place outside designated cultural and political spaces and can be seen to provide opportunities to challenge the ways in which spaces and subjectivities are performatively produced.¹⁵³ In my last substantial chapter I will thus address temporary practices of reuse in their performative and public dimensions to analyse "how creativity and class are performed, reiterated and thus materialised"¹⁵⁴ in urban locales affected by rapid dynamics of transformation, but also to "illuminate how, through performance, these politics are also challenged and disrupted".¹⁵⁵

As argued by Neil Gregson and Gillian Rose, there is an important distinction between notions of performance, understood as what individual and collective subjects *do, say and 'act-out'*, and 'performativity', seen as the ensemble of citational practices which reproduce discourse and which enable and discipline subjects and performances.¹⁵⁶ A performative framework enables to extricate how practitioners and visitors of temporary vacant space reuse disrupt and challenge the 'staged' scripts assigned to them by the urban vibrancy agenda of commissioners and property owners. Thinking about performance and performativity as the articulation of power between subjects and spaces, means to think performatively about the publicness of

¹⁵³ McLean, *The politics of creative performance in public space*, p. 202.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Gregson, N. and Rose, G. 2000: 'Taking Butler elsewhere: performativities, spatialities and subjectivities'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 18, 4, pp. 433–452.

temporary reuse, and the subversive or normative behaviours that it encourages.¹⁵⁷ The question of engendering publics thus requires paying attention to socio-spatial production as both reproducing existing dynamics and as potentially capable of engendering something unexpected, since in the iterative dimension of performativity “there are possibilities for disruption”.¹⁵⁸

In the possibility for disruption, the staging of publicness as a moment of performativity brings together visual and embodied elements, voices and bodies. To think about performativity it also therefore essential to attend to those ‘ethical spectacles’, as they are called by Paul Routledge, following Stephen Duncombe, where “the texture of the experience [...] the emotions generated and felt – and the autonomy of the action mattered as much as [their] political outcomes”.¹⁵⁹ As argued by Alex Vasudevan in relation to the squatting scene in 1990s Berlin, the relationship of countercultural practitioners with the built environment is a crucial element in the creation of urban commons, and needs to be analysed through an embodied and practical understanding of the ways in which the articulation of an alternative vision of the urban intertwines with the micro-political and emotional dimensions of spatial appropriation.¹⁶⁰ Recent ethnographies of the relation between affects and urban politics have also argued for the study of the relationship between intense relationality and processes of politicisation, especially as built over time and through more regular encounters that enable “the accumulation of experiences and the formation of emotional trajectories [that] influence one’s readiness for political action”.¹⁶¹ If readiness for political action can be seen as closely related to embodied practices that belong to the urban everyday, then the transformation of a vacant space through collective use can be understood as an embodied form of practising intensified socio-spatial relations.

¹⁵⁷ Mahony, N., Newman, J. and Barnett, C. 2010: *Rethinking the public: innovations in research, theory and politics*. Bristol: Policy.

¹⁵⁸ Gregson and Rose, Taking Butler elsewhere, p. 437.

¹⁵⁹ See Routledge, P. 2010: Dreaming the real: a politics of ethical spectacle. In Birch, K. and Mykhnenko, V. (eds), *The rise and fall of neoliberalism: the collapse of an economic order?*. London: Zed Books, pp. 206-221. See also Routledge, P. 2011: Sensuous Solidarities: Emotion, Politics and Performance in the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, *Antipode* 44(2), pp. 428-452; and Duncombe, S. 2007: *Dream: reimagining progressive politics in an age of fantasy*. London: The New Press.

¹⁶⁰ Vasudevan, A. 2011: Dramaturgies of dissent: the spatial politics of squatting in Berlin, 1968-. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, p. 290.

¹⁶¹ Boudreau, J.-A., Boucher, N. and Liguori, M. 2009: Taking the bus daily and demonstrating on Sunday: Reflections on the formation of political subjectivity in an urban world. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 13, p. 340.

The everyday dimension of engagement with a vacant space, such as through forms of collective gardening described by the *atelier d'architecture autogérée*, can be seen an intensified relational formation that experiments and challenges already existing social and spatial arrangements.¹⁶² Understanding of these arrangements as potentially capable of producing alternative subjectivities, a possibility is made for urban practices to address the modalities in which subjectivities and affects are produced by re-inventing the relations at play between people and between people and spaces.¹⁶³ The emotional and affective dimension of spatial appropriation and of public encounter should therefore be considered a fundamental component of the experiential dimension of temporary reuse. What is the 'texture of the experience' generated through open public encounters with and through the reuse of vacant spaces? Can they be seen as intensified socio-spatial relations? And what are its implications for the transformative potential of such practices?

Spaces of intensity

The lived experiences of temporary use can be emotionally intense for practitioners, users and participants. Two distinctive theoretical trajectories have emerged in recent years to approach the question of the relational intensity established between spaces and subjects: one that focuses on 'emotional' geographies, the other on 'affectual' geographies. Distinctions between the two have been the subject of lengthy debates. In response to Steve Pile,¹⁶⁴ Giorgio Hadi Curti et al. have recently drawn on a wide interdisciplinary literature to reason on the need for understanding differences and similarities in 'emotional' and 'affectual' geographies.¹⁶⁵ Importantly, they have argued that

the question of identity is *the most fundamental difference between and emotion*: emotional geographies privilege *identity*, it is taken as a first principle where subjectivity, interpretation, meaning, feelings and voice are

¹⁶² AAA/PEPRAV, *Urban/Act*.

¹⁶³ Guattari, F. 1996: Subjectivities: for better and for worse. In Guattari, F. and Genosko, G., (eds), *The Guattari reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 196.

¹⁶⁴ Pile, S. 2009: Emotions and affect in recent human geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35, pp. 5-20.

¹⁶⁵ Curti, G. H., Aitken, S. C., Bosco, F. J. and Goerisch, D. D. 2011: For not limiting emotional and affectual geographies: a collective critique of Steve Pile's 'Emotions and affect in recent human geography'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36, pp. 591-2.

central concerns, while affectual geographies approach identity as, to put it in Deleuze's words, 'a second principle, as a principle *become*'.¹⁶⁶

Therefore, while affectual and emotional geographies "are both about folding movements of the inside and outside as simultaneous relationalities", the different concerns "in what potentially overflows (affect) and what is captured (emotion) lends to them a different approach to politics – and what counts as the political".¹⁶⁷ Both approaches are thus concerned with movements of relationalities, both inside and outside the personal and collective. In affective geographies, such relational intensities are addressed in their excess beyond the personal as processes of collective becoming, not only of subjectivities but of non-human bodies too, such as spaces.

The shift from a question of subjectivity to "what the bodies can *do*, and what relational connections change and alter bodies as they move and sense the world"¹⁶⁸ belongs to a tradition that draws upon Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*. In Deleuze's *Spinoza: practical philosophy* it is argued that the Dutch philosopher's greatest contribution to ethics was the offering of the human body as the new philosophical model.¹⁶⁹ In other words, through encounters an active combination is produced where "knowing proceeds in parallel with the body's physical encounters, out of interaction".¹⁷⁰ According to this interpretative framework, affects are producing and produced by these embodied encounters, not just with other human subjects but with non-human and inorganic matter too, which are thought to influence both physical and mental action.

The power of encounters can be positive, 'compositional', or destructive, 'decomposing'. Embodied experiences of encounter can therefore also be the source of withdrawal and refusal, as with the moments of 'burnout' and resentment. This duplicity is clear in Spinoza's definition of affects as "affections of the body by

¹⁶⁶ Curti et al, For not limiting emotional and affectual geographies, p. 591.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Blackman, L., Cromby, J., Hook, D., Papadopoulos, D. and V. Walkerdine 2008: Creating Subjectivities. *Subjectivity* 1, pp. 1-27.

¹⁶⁹ In the apprehension of reality, body and mind are equally affected by 'embodied' logics of circulation and flow and, according to Deleuze, one of the basic tenets of his theory is the combinational logic of the encounter: "when a body 'encounters' another body [...] it happens that the two relations sometimes combine to form a more powerful whole [...] this is what is prodigious in the body and mind alike, these sets of living parts that enter into composition with and decompose one another", in Deleuze, G. 1988: *Spinoza: practical philosophy*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, pp. 17-19.

¹⁷⁰ Thrift, N. 2004: Intensities of feeling: towards a spatial politics of affect. *Geografiska Annaler* 86, p. 61.

which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished".¹⁷¹ Understanding affects as forces of intensive relationality requires approaching intensities and relations in their duplicitous dimension of positive, augmentative, or negative, diminishing of the power to act.¹⁷² Drawing on a logic of affects, therefore, means to be concerned with the augmentative and diminishing powers that these heterogeneous compositions can engender through embodiment, and to be concerned with the ways in which these compositions can initiate new kinds of politics.¹⁷³

In recent geographical literature, the mobilization of the affective register has been argued to play an important role in the production of urban political dynamics. In Nigel Thrift's formulation, affective economies are currently deployed knowingly "(mainly but not only by the rich and powerful) to political ends".¹⁷⁴ One of the examples used by Thrift to illustrate his argument focuses, unsurprisingly, on the affective power of the discourse of the 'creative cities' and on its ability to produce urban comportments and sensations: since cities are pressured into performing their creativity, "the active engineering of the affective register of cities has been highlighted as the harnessing of the talent of transformation. Cities must exhibit intense expressivity".¹⁷⁵ While a concern with the harnessing of affectual geographies strongly resonates with the debates around experiential economies discussed earlier, in this definition of the political implications of affects lies a danger. As discussed by Clive Barnett, recent debates on affectual geographies have often resorted to the 'trope of manipulation' to make the case for their political implications. To Barnett, such argument presents a political blind spot generated by "a strong ontological claim about the conceptual priority of affective registers over deliberative ones".¹⁷⁶ To interrogate and challenge such claim he points in the direction of critical literature on affective deliberation, a "reconfiguration of affect-

¹⁷¹ Spinoza, B. (edited and translated by G.H.R. Parkinson) 2000: *Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, III, def. 3.

¹⁷² Latham, A. and McCormack, D.P. 2004: Moving cities: rethinking the materialities of urban geographies. *Progress in Human Geography* 28, p. 706.

¹⁷³ Massumi, B. 2002: *Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. See also Bridge, G. and Watson, S. 2011: Reflections on Affect. In Bridge, G. and Watson, S. (eds) *The new Blackwell companion to the city*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

¹⁷⁴ Thrift, 2004: *Intensities of Feeling*, p. 58. See also Thrift, N.J. 2008: *Non-representational theory: space, politics, affect*. London: Routledge, and Amin, A. and Thrift, N.J. 2002: *Cities: reimagining the urban*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Barnett, C. 2008: Political affects in public space: normative blind spots in non-representational ontologies. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33, p. 187.

with-reason” guided by the thought that “rationality emerges out of situated encounters with others”.¹⁷⁷

Following Barnett’s critique, I address the question of the manipulation and staging of affectual and emotional experiences by recognising the relationship between intensities and processes of subjective and collective reflection and deliberation. In drawing attention to the emotional and affectual dimensions of temporary vacant space reuse, it is necessary to approach the intensity of intersubjective relations together with the ability of practitioners and participants to reflect and verbalise such intensities in their decisions and meaning-making processes. This allows addressing the affective register of public encounters in their effects on situated rationalities and on collective understandings of specific practices of reuse as well as of wider urban dynamics. The experiential and performative dimensions of temporary vacant space reuse thus offer the last angle of analysis for my research. If temporary reuse is capable of engendering affective and emotional intensities, only an in-depth understanding of the geographies of use and of its participants and practitioners’ rationales can enable a critical analysis of the specific and situated political implications of temporary projects in vacant spaces.

Towards researching temporary practices of vacant shop reuse

Temporary practices of vacant space reuse can be seen as forms of performative, visual and political action in urban landscapes. As I have discussed in this chapter, practices of reuse exist at the intersection of two diverse trajectories, one related to the development of site-specific community-oriented art practices, and the other to urban social movements and political occupations. By drawing attention to vacant spaces and by appropriating them for common uses, such practices claim to disrupt existing imaginaries of urban decay and development and to engender alternative urban spaces and relations. The temporary appropriation of urban vacancy, however, is increasingly associated with dominating discourses of ‘creative’ regeneration and of entrepreneurialism, and their alterity in relation to dynamics of urban gentrification and development demands critical questioning.

¹⁷⁷ Barnett, *Political affects in public space*, p. 189.

In the course of this chapter I have interrogated the discursive construction of empty spaces reuse as a space of exception and alterity through a discussion of the tensions between the imaginaries that associate vacancy with experimentation and existing cultural, political and urban dynamics. I began by exploring the development of imaginaries of temporary urban reuse and their position in relation to urban development agendas, particularly since the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, and questioned the extent to which the recent proliferation of vacant space reuse can be seen as disruptive of existing urban discourses and imaginaries. Subsequently, I discussed the relationship between the do-it-yourself ethos of practices of reuse and existing dynamics of the precarisation of labour and life, and of project-based network logics, and argued the need to address claims to alterity from an in-depth understanding of their economics and organisational dimensions.

In addressing the political question of power of temporary appropriation, I have argued for the subjectivity of practitioners to be considered a site of struggle where the desire to experiment with different socio-spatial relations encounters the complex power relations of urban dynamics of vacancy. Moreover, the performative production of temporary reuse demands a critical discussion of the effects of staging vacant sites as spaces for public encounters, and of publicness as arising through strategic forms of interpellation and facilitation. Lastly, from an attention to the lived experiential aspect of practices of reuse I have introduced the question of the emotional and affective register of cities, and of the positive and negative intensifications of relations that take place through vacant space re-use, and their potential for new forms of embodied urban politics.

Building on the theoretical debates outline above, in the following chapter I address in more detail the methodological and epistemological issues that have informed my in-depth investigation into official and unofficial practices reclaiming vacant shop fronts for temporary community uses in London between 2009 and 2012. To begin with, I explain the difficulties of producing a strict definition of 'temporary urban reuse' as an object of study, and discuss how a looser understanding can enable a more critical reading of the competing discourses and practices that constitute the fleeting field of temporary reuse in contemporary London. The idea of a field of practices is developed to outline my methodological approach, and to explain the experiences of temporary vacant shop front reuse that I have chosen as my case studies. Secondly, I set out my intention in the study of these

experiences to build from an understanding of practitioners as knowers of urban dynamics, whose practices and positions develop from situated understandings of the city, and whose narratives contribute to varying degrees to the reproduction or critical deconstruction of mainstream discourses of temporary vacant shop reuse. Thirdly, I explain how my choice of in-depth engagement developed from a stage of preliminary observations and interviews with practitioners. My involvement as participant observer to a selected number of experiences of temporary vacant shop reuse enabled me to address and examine the complex cultural, economic and political positions assumed by practitioners in the course of their projects. I argue that such an in-depth and situated approach greatly enriched my discussion of the power entanglements produced by urban interventions, and further developed my analysis of the potential alterity of temporary reuse in contemporary London. Drawing from the debates explored in this chapter, in the latter part of Chapter 2 I outline and discuss in greater detail the research methods and forms of analyses deployed for each of the central chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Following Chapter 2, each of the three central chapters will address a specific issue raised in the course of this chapter, in a theoretical movement from the wider question of urban imaginaries and representations of temporary reuse in policy, politics and culture, to the more detail and micro-political experiences of practitioners and activists involved in specific urban locales. In Chapter 3 I consider the question of the alterity of temporary vacant reuse through a critical analysis of the production of discourses of temporary reuse of shop fronts in 2009-2011 Britain, across policy-making, mainstream media and practitioners' own self-representations. In the following Chapter 4, I select four experiences of community-oriented practices to analyse and discuss in detail the material conditions of accessing and occupying vacant shop fronts in inner London. Finally, in Chapter 5 I discuss two experiences of temporary shop front reuse through the analysis of in-depth conversations, observation and participation, focusing in particular on the performative production of public urban experiences, and the emotional and affectual encounters that they engendered. The last chapter draws together the insights and analyses developed in the course of the thesis to argue their political implications for understanding temporary vacant space reuse as a form of urban action.

Chapter 2

A fleeting field of practices: researching temporary vacant space reuse

As introduced and explored in the previous chapter, the overall aim of this research is the study of temporary practices of vacant urban space reuse from the starting point of a critique of 'urban alterity'. In this chapter I will discuss my methodology, the development of a research design and of situated research questions through a self-reflexive qualitative and ethnographic approach. The first section will outline a series of issues that emerge from existing approaches to 'temporary urbanism' as a new field of practice and enquiry, and will explain how a critical reflection on these approaches has informed my ethical and epistemological framework. In the second section I will discuss how my research focus and the choice of in-depth engagement developed from a stage of preliminary observations and interviews with practitioners. Building on this, I will introduce my main research questions and explain the deployment of a range of qualitative methodologies that inform my three main empirical chapters. The chapter comes to a close with a reflection on the research process, on its potentials and limitations, concluding with trajectories for further research.

Approaches to the study of temporary vacant space reuse

The notions of 'temporary use' and 'pop-up shops' have become over the last decade shared signifiers recognisable by practitioners in the fields of visual art, architecture and planning as well as by various urban audiences, to the extent that a UK national newspaper announced in 2010 that a 'pop-up revolution' was under way.¹ Community-oriented 'pop-up shops' and other examples of non-commercial temporary urban uses, on the other hand, defy clear definitions. The discrepancy between the rapid uptake and proliferation of the idea of temporary use and its far more nebulous definition as an object of study is visible in the work of many researchers and commentators struggling to offer 'best practice' case study for

¹ Cochrane, K. 2010: Why pop-ups pop up everywhere. *The Guardian*, 12th October 2010. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, commercial 'pop-up retail' became 'a new urban trend' and a subject of enquiry in the early 2000s, see for instance Trendwatching 2004 (2010): Pop-up Retail. www.trendwatching.com [accessed 22nd October 2010].

planners, practitioners, and urban policy-makers. As briefly discussed in the introduction, the definition of the temporal and practical boundaries of what constitutes ‘temporary urbanism’ in the body of empirical work produced over the last few years by public, private and third sector organisations, needs to be carefully analysed in relation to the claims and agendas that compose the contemporary discourse of temporary use, as discussed in the following Chapter.

In order to grasp the variables of ‘temporary urban reuse’ in the early stages of their appearance and proliferation, European Union-funded research such as the Urban Catalyst Project (2001-2003) listed strategies, typologies and examples which aimed to systematise ‘the field’. This taxonomic approach was further developed in a survey of almost 100 temporary uses in Berlin (2004/2005) which became the basis for their seminal *Urban Pioneers: Temporary Reuse and Urban Development in Berlin* (2007).² More recent UK-focused reports have followed this approach, for instance the Meanwhile Project report *No Time to Waste... The Meanwhile Use of Assets for Community Benefit* (2010); the NESTA/CABE *Compendium for the Civic Economy* (2011); Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams’s *The Temporary City* (2012); the Empty Shop Network’s report *Pop-Up People* (2012) and Killing Architects’ report *Urban Tactics – Temporary Interventions + Long Term Planning* (2012), just to name a few.³ Shared by these reports and publications is an effort to define the subject of study and, in doing so, the methodological decision to bring together a set of diverse practices.

The issue is directly addressed by Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams in the introduction to *The Temporary City*, in which they narrate their difficulties in structuring the book:

not just because there are so many different ways of organising the information, but because interestingly, the boundaries between so many of

² Urban Catalyst coordinated a European research project on urban development through temporary use. It examined a series of case studies in ‘residual’ urban areas of Amsterdam, Berlin, Helsinki, Naples and Vienna and was funded by the EU’s 5th Framework Programme (2001-2003), <http://www.urbancatalyst.net/projekte.php?lang=en> [accessed 22nd November 2011]. Studio Urban Catalyst/ Klaus Overmeyer 2007: *Urban Pioneers. Temporary Use and Urban Development in Berlin*. Berlin: Jovis Verlag.

³ Meanwhile Project 2010: *No Time to Waste... The Meanwhile Use of Assets for Community Benefit*. London: Meanwhile Space CIC; NESTA, CABE, and 00:/ 2011: *Compendium for the Civic Economy*; Bishop, P., and L. Williams 2012: *The Temporary City*. London: Routledge. Also: Thompson, D. 2012: *Pop-up People: We Can Do So Much More Together*. Empty Shop Network; and Killing Architects 2012: *Urban Tactics: Temporary Interventions + Long Term Planning*. Rotterdam: Killing Architects - Netherlands Architecture Fund.

the themes that could help organise the material are becoming blurred. In fact the blurring of traditional distinctions between land use types and activities, and the interaction and overlap between the factors that are driving temporary activities are themes that run throughout the book, and are perhaps a key characteristic of temporary urbanism.⁴

The term ‘temporary urbanism’ is thus used to indicate an uncertain territory and a blurring of boundaries between themes, practices, rationales and agendas, and this openness enables authors to include a very diverse range of activities under the same heading. The blurring of traditional distinctions between land use types and activities, for instance, is exemplified by the authors’ choice to include in the book a section headed ‘Countercultural and activism’ where the arts-based squatters’ collective Oubliette Art House is taken to illustrate Hakim Bey’s TAZs.⁵ Other reports mentioned earlier operate with a similar looseness of definition, gathering together very different practices, from short-term urban gardening to social projects in large vacant buildings, and moving between artistic projects, community-run initiatives and social enterprises.

The second main issue worth examining in such reports and publications is the qualification of urban practices as *temporary*. As explained in the introduction of the *Urban Tactics* report “the biggest difference in these projects was in their time scales, which ranged from two to three days, to a number of years”⁶. The authors reflect that:

the binary distinction of ‘temporary’ and ‘permanent’ is deeply inadequate to describe the range of projects which happen in a city. ‘Temporary’ is ascribed to projects which vary wildly length, too much so for it to be a truly useful descriptor [...] the most useful distinction is probably between the short, event-like temporary projects, which lasted for only a few days, and those that last longer. Shorter projects allowed experimentation with public spaces, since the stakeholder commitment required for a project of only a few

⁴ Bishop and Williams, *The Temporary City*, pp. 6-7.

⁵ Hakim Bey is mentioned here in a curiously individualistic, depoliticised and hedonistic interpretation of Temporary Autonomous Zones as ways in which the individual briefly experience total freedom. Bishop and Williams, *The Temporary City*, pp. 30-32. Allegedly, one of the spokespersons for the Oubliette Art House Collective, complained that their practice had been misrepresented in the book, which did not mention any of the political dimensions of their activities, as visible on their website, where the collective took an active stance against the proposed criminalisation of squatting in 2012. Diary entry, 13th February 2012.

⁶ Killing Architects, *Urban Tactics*, p. 4.

days is relatively low. They also allow important relationships to be built. The longer-term projects were in place long enough for them to become more established in the local area and for communities to begin to grow around them.⁷

The ‘temporariness’ of temporary urbanism is thus also a debatable variable. Urban Tactics’ proposal to distinguish between ‘event-like projects’ and ‘those lasting longer’ offers only a superficial and partial solution, and the problem remains when the focus shifts from the need to order and create taxonomies and guidelines, to the desire to pay attention to the relationships and communities that are established in and through the use of space. For this reason other authors concerned with similar questions have opted for a thematic approach based on what such activities *do* to the city and its communities: reclaiming, transgressing, contesting, appropriating, uncovering, pluralising.⁸ In short, an overview of the existing production of knowledge about temporary practices of reuse seems to indicate a loose correspondence between terms such as ‘temporary urbanism’ and a range of very different specific projects and practices on the ground.

The blurred boundaries of such terms therefore make it difficult if not impossible to think of a typology of practices from which to draw representative samples. Similarly, the temporal aspect of such practices cannot be easily used to define the boundaries of the notion of ‘temporary reuse’ and the justification for including or excluding certain activities. In the course of my research I thus began by critically exploring and questioning different possible taxonomies of temporary urban reuse, and became increasingly interested in the ambiguities and practical and conceptual overlaps of what I considered an emerging discursive and practical field. As I discuss in further detail in the course of this chapter, my critical observations of the field informed my selection of short-term practices of shop front reuse as examples of temporary urban reuse. Before I clarify the thinking behind my criteria and research process, it is essential to explain my rationale and epistemological position.

⁷ Killing Architects, *Urban Tactics*, p. 5.

⁸ These are the chapter titles in Hou, J. (ed.) 2010: *Insurgent public space: guerrilla urbanism and the remaking of contemporary cities*. London: Routledge.

Research logic and politics

In order to address the question of alterity discussed in the previous chapter, I started from a critique of the de-contextualised and disembodied examples promoted by reports and policy-making. The loose taxonomic approach and the ‘best practice’ logic of ‘temporary urbanism’ promote easily transferrable models that can be replicated across a range of very diverse temporal, spatial, legal and social circumstances, an example of the technocratic replication fantasy that Peck, Theodore and Brenner have called ‘the fast policy complex’ of neoliberal urbanism.⁹ To counter the often uncritical narratives of ‘pop-up’ urbanism¹⁰ I was interested in the specific socio-spatial relations set in motion by temporary practices. My epistemological standpoint moved from the feminist post-structuralist tenet that all processes of knowledge-production are situated, in opposition to “the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity”.¹¹ As a cultural practitioner and activist, I was particularly attentive to the frictions, difficulties, negotiations and power relations as experienced and understood by practitioners on the ground, which indicated the potentials and limitations of temporary reuse as a form of urban action. My research is therefore grounded in practitioners’ experiences and self-reflections about the ways in which they inhabit discourse and the shifting legal, social and economic dynamics that produce vacant spaces as well as their availability for cultural and political use.

Such an aim resonates with recent debates around participatory action research approaches, particularly around the power/knowledge relationships established through socially engaged research.¹² A critical and situated stance towards the production of urban knowledge means to recognise that there can be different types of urban expertise, which can only be negotiated through a fundamental reworking of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. The starting point of my approach will therefore require an understanding of practitioners and activists as sophisticated knowers of urban dynamics. Building on this assumption means to challenge the implicit hierarchy

⁹ Peck, J., N. Theodore, and N. Brenner 2012: Neoliberalism Resurgent? Market Rule after the Great Recession. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111(2), pp. 265-288.

¹⁰ An example among many is the web platform <http://popupcity.net/> [accessed 11th March 2013].

¹¹ Haraway, D. 1988: Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3), p. 589.

¹² Kesby, M. 2007: Spatialising participatory approaches: the contribution of geography to a mature debate. *Environment and Planning A* 39(12), pp. 2813-2831.

existing between the knowledge of urban dynamics produced by academic scholarship and practitioners' tactical and embodied understanding of the city, and the ways these are rehearsed through language in processes of production of meanings. Paying attention to the practitioners and activists' accounts means not only to explore the experiential dimension of temporary reuse, but also to think about these activities and projects as moments of production of bottom-up urban knowledges, which may not be otherwise accessible to other urban dwellers.

An attention to the processes of meaning-making about space and urban dynamics thus serves a double function: on the one hand to populate the top-down accounts of policy-makers and the media with the critical and creative approaches and reflections of those carrying out the practices under study; on the other, to attend to processes and dynamics that may be invisible to non-practitioners. Firstly, therefore, it will be important to address the roles assigned to cultural and countercultural practitioners in the performance of urban attractiveness by theories of culture-led gentrification. In these accounts, practitioners are often understood as naive and unwilling agents of capital, whose whimsical behaviour has to be encouraged and followed through a set of public policies and private investments, under the umbrella of the 'creative city' promise of regeneration and economic development. The recasting of cultural practitioners as a growth-driving post-industrial creative class has assigned them an even more apolitical and aggressive role than it was the case in previous analyses¹³, as cultural urban projects become a privileged source of cheap branding and a catalyst for urban uneven development.

What these accounts fail to address is the degree of critique, questioning and resistance that practitioners acting in urban scenarios have been capable to generate and disseminate, some of which have been discussed in the previous chapter. While the 'creative cities' idea and related trends in urban and social policy propagate specific understandings and imaginaries of notions such as culture, community and art, other trajectories and artistic-political genealogies have informed attempts to subvert, critique and even outright antagonise such discourses and the mechanisms for their enactment. The discursive and embodied field within which temporary practices of reuse take place will therefore be understood as a contested field of meaning-making activities.

¹³ Zukin, S. 1982: *Loft living: culture and capital in urban change*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Secondly, with the steady increase of students choosing higher education in art and the creative industries since the mid-1990s,¹⁴ graduates in the cultural sector are confronted with a high supply of highly skilled and highly educated cultural workers competing for scarce resources in terms of space, remuneration and visibility. The result is that in complex urban situations such as London, artists and cultural workers are often pushed to develop a great understanding of real estate trends and dynamics of rent and urban renewal, since from this knowledge derives their ability to survive in a highly precarious and competitive urban environment. My research was thus grounded in the hypothesis that artists engaging in empty space reuse are far from the naive and unwilling gentrifiers and are actually sophisticated knowers of the city, its rhythms and transformations. Moreover, beyond careerism and dire necessity, there has always been a section of cultural workers who have actively sought a critical engagement with urban transformation, and whose work has taken a strongly politicised position to experiment with “less commodified, alternative and often more subversive forms of creativity in the city”.¹⁵

By engaging with practitioners’ own narratives and rationales for spatial use, and their situated understanding of various and contradictory positions, I was able to ground my analysis on practitioners’ claims to experiment with critical approaches to the city and on an assessment of the different degrees of critique they performed through more nuanced accounts of the relationship between culture and urban dynamics. As discussed in the previous chapter, the potential to disrupt existing urban dynamics and imaginaries is essential to an understanding of the power of temporary reuse as a form of urban action, and demands an in-depth understanding of the power relations that produce and are produced by temporary urban interventions. In my research I therefore approached claims to resistance and critique both through the analysis of material processes of reuse and through a direct questioning of practitioners’ narratives in the course of repeated research encounters.

¹⁴ HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) 1996/7 to 2008/9: Students and Qualifiers Data Tables.

¹⁵ Edensor, T., Leslie, D., Millington, S. and Rantisi, N. (eds) 2010: *Spaces of vernacular creativity: rethinking the cultural economy*. London: Routledge, p. 5.

Performative research encounters

A situated study from within practices and places needs a discussion of my position as a researcher and of the politics inherent in my research. A feminist situated standpoint has repercussions both on assumptions about “the forms in which knowledge and practices of the urban come about”¹⁶ as well as on the complex position of the researcher in relation to these knowledges and practices.¹⁷ As a young cultural practitioner, activist and writer, I shared both the educational background as well as my informal and professional networks with the art/activist groups who are the subject of my research, and consequently found myself in a privileged position from which I could observe and participate in practices and projects. The rationale for starting from practitioners and activists’ standpoints is thus my way to begin from my own positionality, not simply because of the need to possess prior knowledges in order to address the complex symbolic and cultural politics of practices and spaces, but also to create meaningful encounters and conversations on mutual grounds of respect and understanding, a position that I would not be able to sustain if I were to approach my research from the position of a total outsider. Building on a personal involvement with the themes and issues under study, I understand this research as a part of an ongoing practical and theoretical engagement with the very issues and struggles that move many of the practices investigated.¹⁸

The ethical position of participatory research, and the degree of openness and reciprocity, is also to be seen as an attempt to explore and facilitate existing critical discussions and supporting forms of self-reflexivity.¹⁹ As observed by Pain, a participatory approach “encourages and enables the drawing of multiple connections between issues and processes at different scales”²⁰, and can contribute to critical understanding. Thinking about participatory action research in a post-structuralist vein means to address how narratives and accounts are not only produced by

¹⁶ Kesby, M. 2000: Participatory diagramming: deploying qualitative methods through an action research epistemology. *Area* 32, p. 423.

¹⁷ Rose, G. 1997: Situating knowledges: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics. *Progress in Human Geography* 21(3), pp. 305-320; and Berg, L.D., Mansvelt, J.R. 2000: Writing in, speaking out: Communicating qualitative research findings. In Hay, I. (ed.) *Qualitative research methods in human geography*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, pp. 161-182.

¹⁸ Avis, H. 2002: Whose Voice is That? Making Space for Subjectivities in Interviews. In Bondi, L. (ed.) *Subjectivities, knowledges and feminist geographies: the subjects and ethics of social research*. Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield, pp. 191-207.

¹⁹ See the special issue Cahill, C., Sultana F. and R. Pain (eds) 2007: Special Thematic Issue: Participatory Ethics. *ACME* 6 (3).

²⁰ Pain, R. 2004: Social geography: participatory research. *Progress in Human Geography* 28(5), p. 653.

subjects, but produce them as well.²¹ This means that my research will not uncover ‘local’ knowledges, but rather that by engaging with a participatory process of discussion and reflection, a specific and contingent set of knowledges and conceptual connections will be produced and challenged anew.

Within this epistemological and ethical framework, the research encounter is therefore thought as a form of action in itself: a sounding board from which participants could define and analyse their own problems in their practice and everyday lives, with a focus on “the production of knowledge for action ‘in the field’”²². By engaging in conversations and discussions with art/activist practitioners, I aim to contribute to the reasoning and self-reflexivity that inform their everyday practices. From the perspective of performativity, subjects and spaces are produced through practices as much as through the visual and verbal languages that are used to narrate them, so the performance of these languages can be considered practices in themselves.²³ Spatial practices are understood as co-constituted by actions and their self-representation, therefore requiring an engagement both with the embodied dimension and the personal and collective narratives and visual iconographies that accompany them. Such a standpoint challenges the dichotomy between an ‘authentic’ embodied dimension and its ‘inauthentic’ narrative, and requires a methodological approach that fluidly combines observation, participation and in-depth interviews and conversations with participants.

In the development of my research framework I was also inspired by experiences and theoretical positions associated with ideas of ‘militant investigation’.²⁴ For the Argentinean research-action collective *Colectivo Situaciones* a militant investigation begins by questioning the figure of the ‘university researcher’ as “detached, unchangeable, who links himself [sic] to his research as to an object of analysis” and whose “fidelity to institutional procedures, academic or para-academic, eludes any commitment to the situation”²⁵. Against this

²¹ Cameron, J., and K. Gibson 2005: Participatory action research in a poststructuralist vein. *Geoforum* 36(3), pp. 315-331.

²² Kesby, M. 2007: Spatialising participatory approaches: the contribution of geography to a mature debate. *Environment and Planning A* 39, pp. 424-425.

²³ Austin, J.L., Urnson, J.O. and Sbisá, M. 1976: *How to do things with words*. London: Oxford University Press; Butler, J. 1993: *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of “sex”*. New York: Routledge. See also Harvie, J. 2009: *Theatre & the city*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 45-47.

²⁴ Shukaitis, S., D. Graeber, and E. Biddle 2007: *Constituent imagination: militant investigations, collective theorization*. Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press.

²⁵ Colectivo Situaciones 2005: Something More on Research Militancy: Footnotes on Procedures and

approach they propose instead a methodology that moves from the desire “to create a practice capable of articulating *involvement* and *thought*” which depends on the researcher’s capacity for “experience, involvement, and encounter”.²⁶ From this ethical standpoint

the subject of knowledge or of political action could not be conceived as transcendent with respect to situations, but made itself present for us as an effect of those encounters. If there was a *hinge* decision, in this sense, it was that of thinking ‘in and from’ the *situation*; that is, without conceiving practices, theories, or subjects ‘a priori’.²⁷

Encounters thus become the starting point of a militant investigation: encounters with places, with individuals and collectives, and with issues, in order to think ‘in and from’ the *situation*. What this framework identifies is therefore both a question of the ability of the research to be open and be transformed by those encounters, and of a more pragmatic question of a situated and open-ended research design where knowledge is co-produced through conversations and dialogue.

For all these reasons my research design was intentionally open-ended and emerged from a range of encounters with the ‘field’ as will be discussed in more detail below. The starting point was the intention to be open to discuss both my theoretical approach and my own position with the practitioners and activists that I encountered, and therefore to understand the research as a performative moment in the production of critical knowledge about the politics of temporary practices of reuse and about broader dynamics of urban transformation.

An emerging research design: the ‘field’

A critical understanding of the loose definition of ‘temporary vacant space reuse’ as an object of study, paired with the desire to carry out a situated and engaged form of ‘militant investigation’ led me to spend several months of open-ended exploratory research comprising semi-structured interviewing and participant observation throughout 2010. During this period I attended public events in temporary spaces across London, such as openings of temporary art exhibitions, pop-

(In)Decisions. *Ephemera* 5 (4), p. 605.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 606.

up theatre performances, talks, workshops, public meetings and activist events. Gaining access to participate and observe cultural projects of temporary reuse was relatively easy given my previous education background in art theory at a London college, which had provided me with a networks of friends and former colleagues active in the transnational mobile art and cultural world of self-organised exhibitions, talks and shows. My age, ethnicity and general appearance moreover helped me to be classed strategically as a peer or as innocuous in situations when I was 'studying up' to managers, intermediaries and authorities, as will be explained below.

My observations were accompanied by detailed field notes, which focused on the audiences, the spaces, their location and access as well as on the ways in which the vacant site and the surrounding place were referenced in the promotional materials. Beyond offering a first-hand account of the sites that I was gathering for my mappings and archives, it provided necessary entry points for understanding the references made by participants to my research and as a first contact with potential participants. One of the key issues of practices in temporary and pop-up spaces is that the public is informed at a very short notice, mostly through social media, personal contacts and word of mouth. In order to keep up to date with the latest space or event, in this preliminary phase I joined several e-newsletters and mailing lists and in so doing began to identify groups, intermediaries and online platforms that created and maintained fast paced connections between networks of practitioners, vacant spaces and audiences. I also began archiving digital and analogic promotional visual materials related to temporary and pop-up practices and projects, which were essential for my study of the discursive field of reuse in Chapter 3, as discussed further in this chapter.

In this initial phase I had started to become more involved in practices and spaces belonging more directly to countercultural and occupied social spaces. In early 2010 I began volunteering with the collective that had formed after the eviction of RampART social centre, which for several years had been a central point of reference for the occupied social centre's movement in London and in the UK.²⁸

²⁸ The space was finally evicted on 15th October 2009. For an archive of activities and an account of the violent eviction and resistance, see <http://therampart.wordpress.com/> [accessed 20th October 2012]. See also Hodkinson, S., and Chatterton, P. 2006: Autonomy in the city? Reflections on the social centres movement in the UK. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 10 (3), pp. 305-315.

This period gave me first hand experience of the great difficulties and uncertainties that accompany the process of setting up social spaces in squatted sites, since in little more than six months the collective helped to set up and saw the end of three occupied social centres.²⁹ Over late spring and summer 2010 the collective was actively supporting and organising events at ‘195 Mare Street’, an occupied social centre in a formerly abandoned 18th century mansion at the address indicated by its name. The place was active between April and September 2010, when it received a High Court Injunction and was evicted by bailiffs on their second attempt to vacate the building. Shortly after these events the RampART collective disbanded and continued to exist only in the form of the weekly digital newsletter [SocialCentreNews].³⁰ In this initial exploratory period I also frequently visited the squatted Non Commercial House,³¹ which was evicted in February 2010 and whose freeshop, a free space to exchange donated objects, was to become important for the experience of the OffMarket, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

In my preliminary explorations I carried out a small pilot of five in-depth interviews and an equal number of more informal conversations with cultural practitioners and activists selected on the basis of having recently initiated or participated in practices of temporary reuse in London. These early semi-structured conversations shaped my understanding of key issues in the field, and offered invaluable insights into a wider range of practices, as well as access to other practitioners of temporary reuse through snowballing.³² During these preliminary conversations I also experimented with forms of participatory diagramming, asking interviewees to make listings and rankings of projects and temporary spaces that they had referred to during the conversation, and to explain their understanding of the relation between such spaces. The process of producing the diagrams was talked

²⁹ The ‘Lift’n’Hoist’ lasted only about 3 months, between November 2009 and February 2010, after which the collective left the space over arguments with some of the occupiers, who had decided to negotiate directly with the owners (a housing association) without any collective discussion. The space was evicted shortly after. Source: <http://liftinhoist.ucrony.net> [accessed 13th December 2012]. The second space, ‘Three Colts Lane’, was an abandoned pub on 29 Three Colts Lane in Bethnal Green, was briefly occupied and set up in early 2010, but evicted and demolished after roughly one month. The third site was also an abandoned pub on 105 Globe Road, briefly active as a social centre between March and April 2010, when it was illegally and brutally evicted. In 2010 the pub was demolished and was replaced in 2011 by a five stories residential property.

³⁰ The [SocialCenterNews] newsletter began in the mid 2000s and came to an end in October 2012.

³¹ See the group page for Non Commercial House on *Indymedia London* <https://london.indymedia.org.uk/groups/non-commercial-house> [accessed 3rd March 2011].

³² Formal interviews included: Werner (15th July 2010), Aydan (16th August 2010), Samira (17th August 2010), and Lotte (10th December 2010 and 4th February 2011).

through with the participant in the course of the sound recorded interviews. Through this method I was attempting to facilitate participants' own deconstruction and reconstruction of the categories and meanings that informed their practices, "facilitating participants' own reflection on existing knowledges and their production of provisional new ones"³³. The process of visualising and explaining the rationale before their diagrams enabled participants to rehearse their position and affinities. As a performative exercise in self-representation and critical self-positioning, diagramming offered me an initial entry point to understand "how sliding identities are created, and how the multiple connections between spatiality and subjectivity are seen to be grounded in the contested terrain between discourse communities"³⁴.

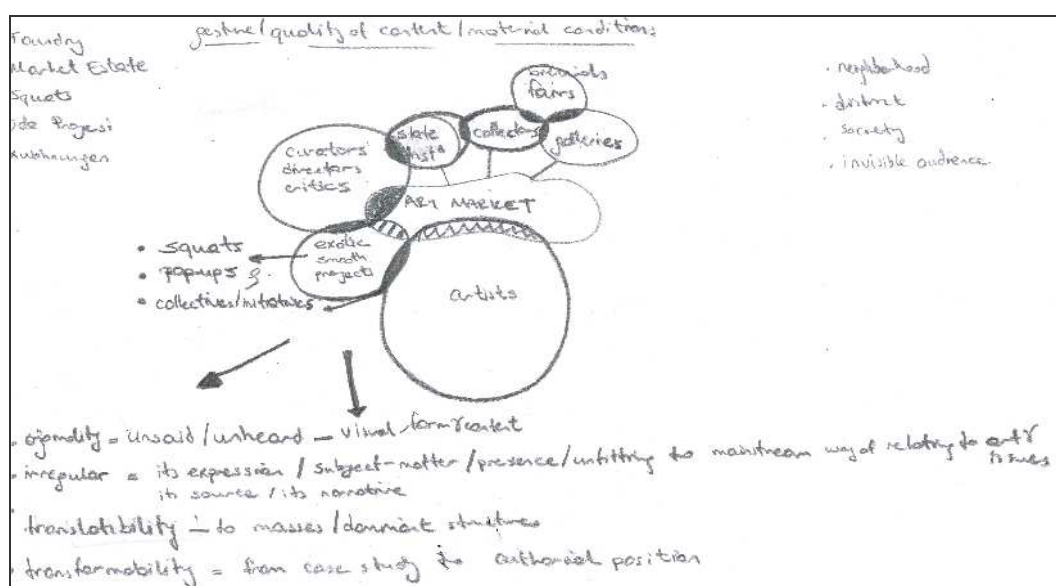


Figure 2.1 Diagram by Aydan, 16th August 2010.

A diagram such as Aydan's [fig. 2.1] combined a listing of practices of temporary vacant space reuse, on the top left side of the page, with a visualisation of overlaps and connections between different spheres of practice in the field of artistic production. Aydan, a London-based international contemporary art curator, positioned temporary vacant space reuse as belonging to the set of 'exotic smooth projects', which include both 'squats' and 'pop-ups', that are valorised by a small proportion of curators, directors and critiques, the art market, and artists. According to Aydan's conceptual diagram, the artistic value of temporary projects lies in their

³³ Kesby, Participatory diagramming, p. 420.

³⁴ Paulston, R.G. 1996: *Social cartography: mapping ways of seeing social and educational change*. New York and London: Garland, p. xxi.

originality, irregularity, translatability and transformability, as can be read at the bottom of the page.

The production of Lotte's diagram [fig. 2.2] followed a different process. She drew on her long-term experiences as a squatter, activist and theatre practitioner in London to position a range of practices reusing vacant spaces for various lengths of time. Her mapping of the field of temporary reuse is framed by two conceptual axes that indicate degrees of 'autonomy' and 'professionalisation', which we had identified as opposite during our first conversation a few months prior.³⁵

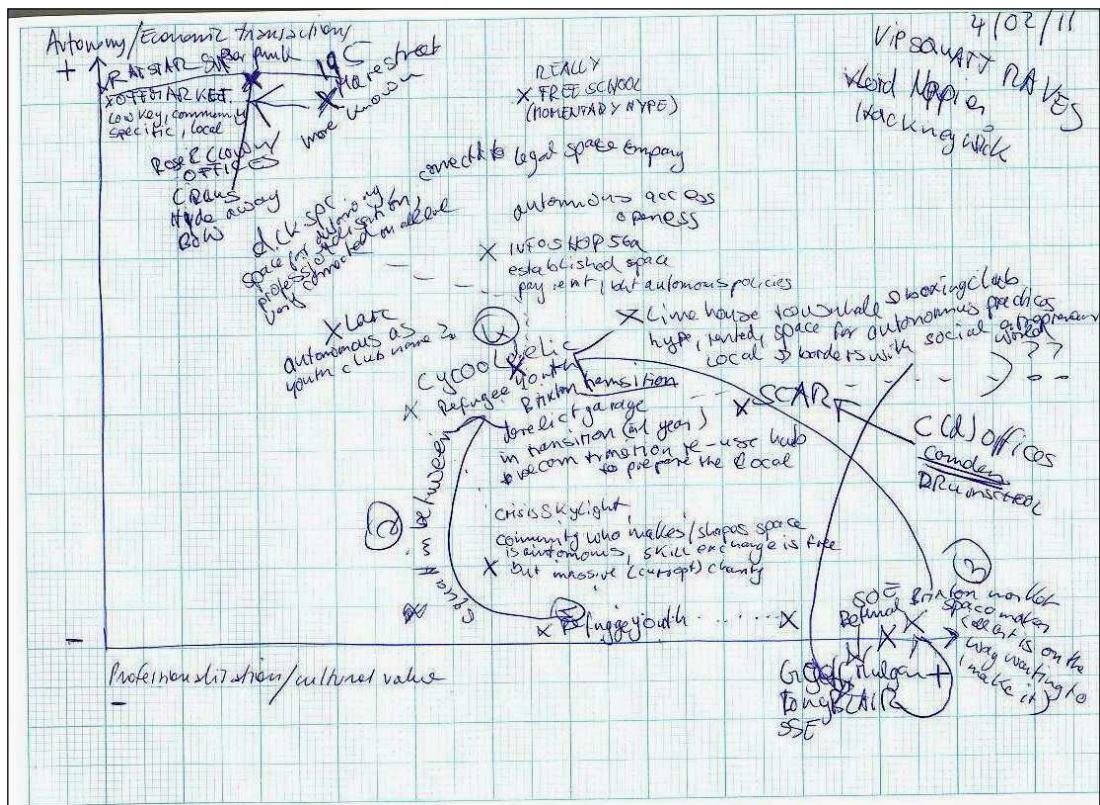


Figure 2.2 Diagram by Lotte, 4th February 2011.

On the top left corner the squatted shop front OffMarket, which became one of my in-depth case studies, was characterised as highly autonomous, both politically and economically, and as having little cultural value and little scope for becoming professionalised. At the opposite extreme of the graph, and therefore as less autonomous and more 'professional', she positioned SpaceMakers Agency' Brixton Village, a temporary project in a vacant shopping arcade in south London that I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3. While each diagram offered a different

³⁵ Conversation with Lotte, 10th December 2010.

visualisation of the ‘field’ of temporary reuse, similar practices were indicated as points of reference for practitioners who did not personally know each other, even if they belonged to my extended professional and friendship networks. The discussion of these diagrams also revealed rather different categories and justifications for distinguishing between practices and assigning them value.

Mapping and diagramming

In the meanwhile, I began experimenting with my own diagramming and mapping, producing mainly three kinds of visualisations that accompanied my explorations and understanding of the field of temporary reuse: geo-referenced maps of projects in inner London, diagrams of networks, institutional connections and policy transfers, and more conceptual maps of the position of practices and projects within the field, as I discuss later in this chapter.

The creation of geo-referenced maps was the result of a desire to document the extension of temporary reuse at the same time as I kept an archive of sites and projects, initially through simple online Google Maps [fig. 2.3] that I later exported and elaborated in Quantum GIS. By translating data gathered through observation, conversations, newsletters and online research into basic spatial visualisation I began to draw connections and to explore the relationships between national policies and funding, and local authorities’ ‘temporary reuse’ pilot schemes. For example, maps such as figure 2.4 drew my attention to the proliferation of temporary shop fronts within the boundaries of the boroughs of Camden, Hackney and Southwark. Both councils had run policies to encourage the temporary reuse of vacant shop fronts between 2009 and 2011, but according to very different budgets, policies and implementations, as discussed in the following chapter. Many of the practices highlighted in north Southwark, on the contrary, were related to the development plans of the area surrounding the roundabouts of Elephant & Castle, as explained in greater detail in Chapter 4. The production of simple maps of inner London enabled me to monitor the spatial extension and proliferation of practices and projects throughout my fieldwork, and offered the data for producing the sets of maps that accompany this thesis.

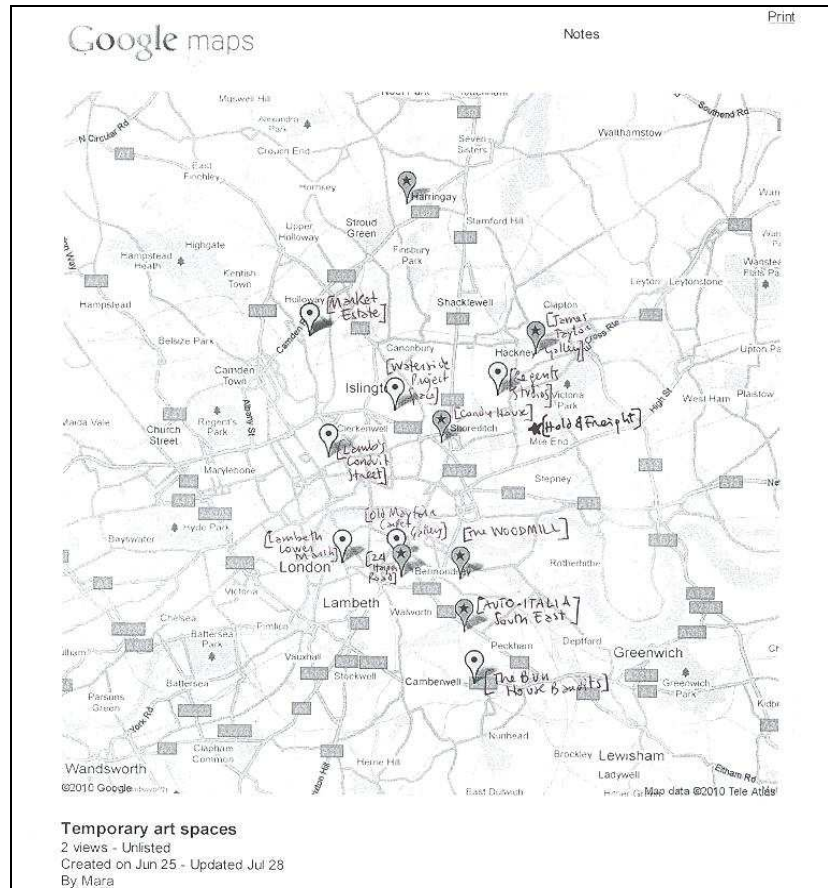


Figure 2.3 Preliminary Google Map 25th June 2010.

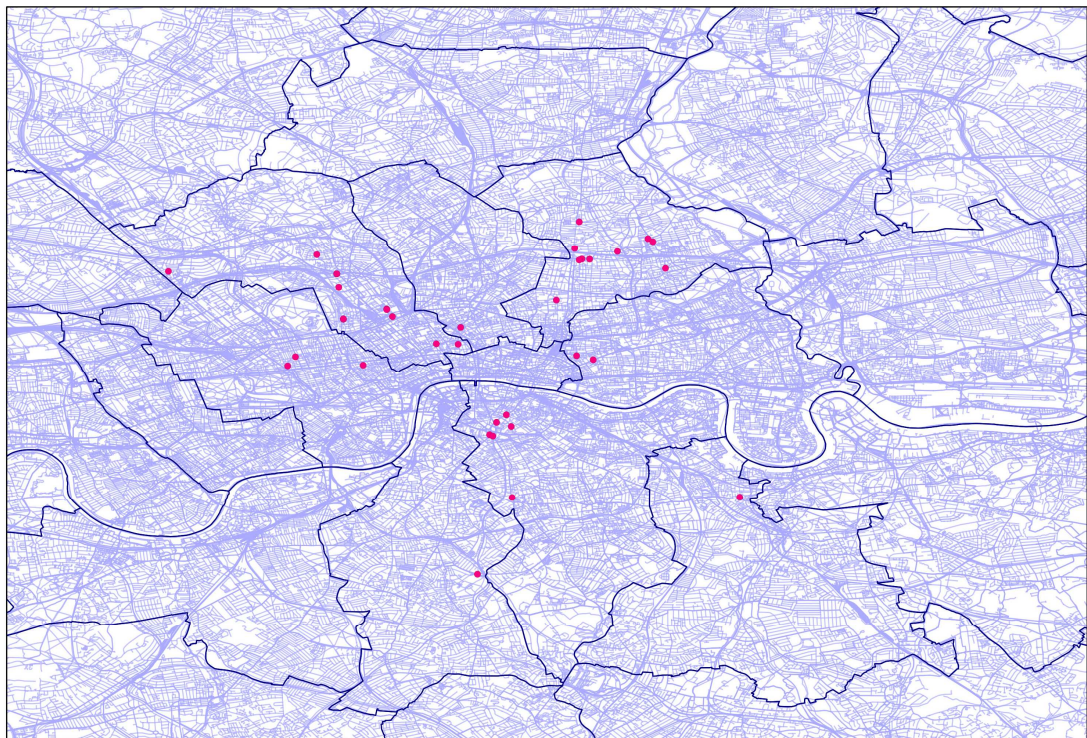


Figure 2.4 QGIS map of inner London showing local authorities' boundaries and the location of temporary shop front reuse between 2009 and 2011.

My second set of visualisations of the field entailed diagrams of connections between project of temporary use, network of practitioners and institutional or semi-institutional affiliations. As I proceeded with my observations and conversations, these diagrams enabled me to visualise and record connections between groups, practices and spaces, and sometimes to identify particular individuals to approach for further conversations. In the diagram below [fig. 2.5] I attempted to follow groups and collectives and their connections with specific spaces of temporary use. For instance, members of Arts Against Cuts, a very active loose network of artists, arts educators and students that had formed during the student protests in 2010-2011 had been associated with a different range of temporary venues, from the already mentioned Brixton Village, to the professional James Taylor Gallery to the squatted multi-site Really Free School. Similar rapid network maps enabled me to extricate positions and connections and became the basis for my analysis of the overlaps and ambiguities that underpin temporary urban reuse as a contested field.

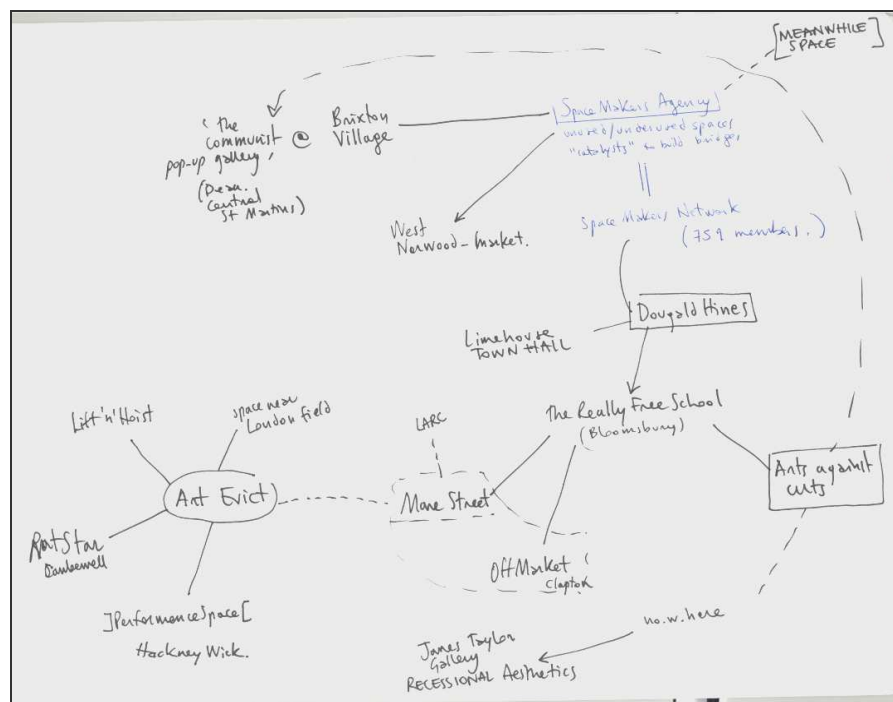


Figure 2.5 Diagram 8th February 2011.

As part of this set of diagrams I began to sketch connections between national and local authorities' policies of temporary vacant space reuse, the role of intermediaries (such as Meanwhile Space CIC, as discussed in the next chapter) and of London-based institutions such as the Royal Institute of British Architects

(RIBA), as illustrated by figure 2.6. These initial sketches became the basis for the more elaborate temporal mappings of transfers and translations between government bodies, the private sector, intermediaries and practitioners that accompany my analysis of competing discourses of temporary vacant space reuse in Chapter 3.³⁶

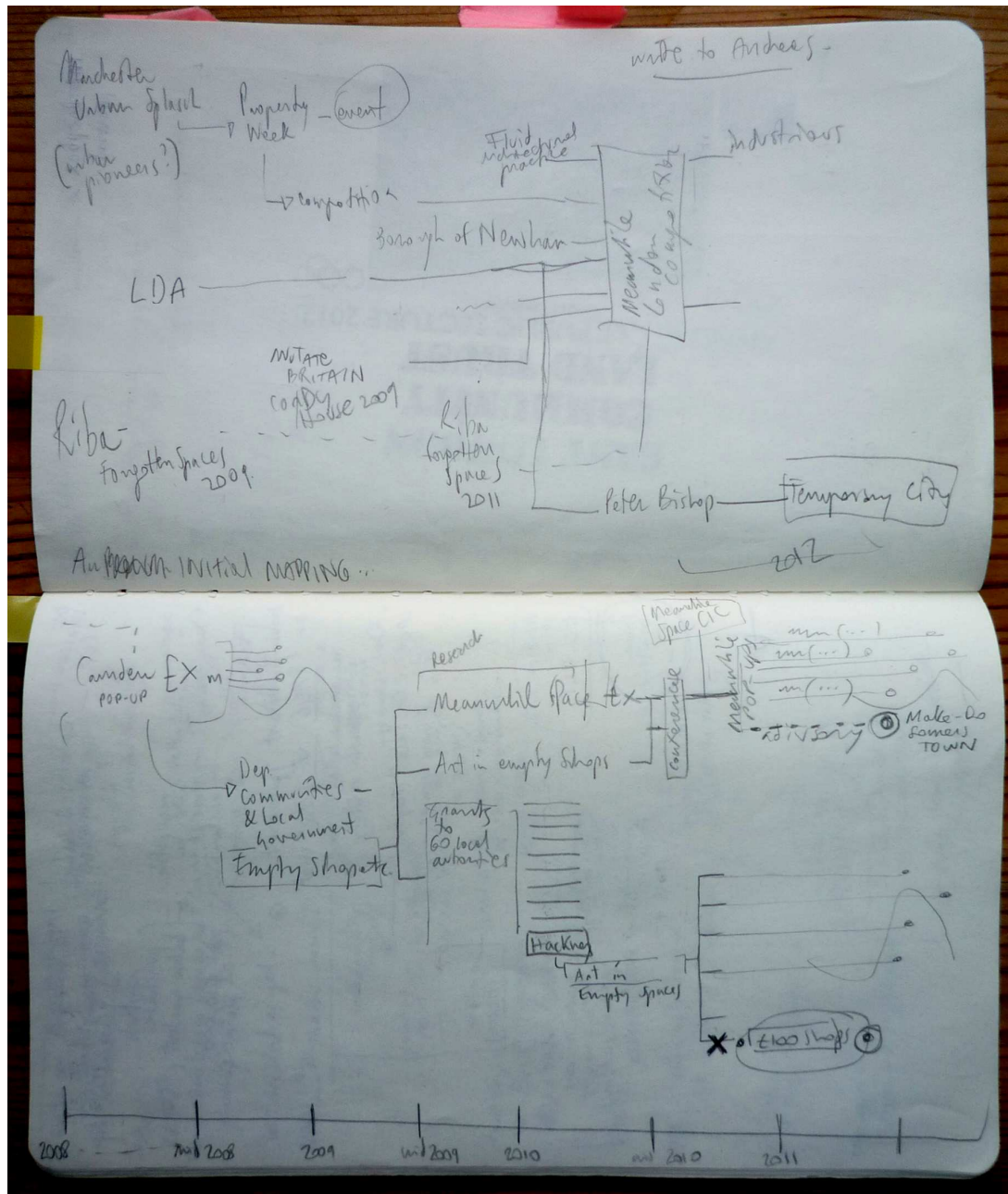


Figure 2.6 Diagram of local and national schemes and institutional support between 2009 and early 2012, 12th March 2012.

³⁶ For the temporal diagrams included in the following chapter I was also inspired by Rosenberg, D. and Grafton A. 2010: *Cartographies of Time: a history of the timeline*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Initial reflections and research questions

The development of the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1 proceeded alongside and was greatly influenced by the participant observations, conversations and diagramming carried out in the preliminary stages of my research. From these initial explorations emerged three main theoretical and practical reflections on my methodology and research questions as “the questions to which we are directed are formulated according to an exposure to the social scene over time and an observation of people’s everyday actions”³⁷.

To begin with, my intention to bring together critical urban and cultural theory and the situated experiences of practitioners had revealed a methodological tension between a ‘cultural materialist’ and a ‘performative’ approach to urban practices. As observed by Jen Harvie, the two approaches dominate the study of urban cultures and present different tendencies: by focusing on the critical study of material conditions, the first tends towards a pessimistic analysis, while the second, committed to understanding the performative and prefigurative potential of practices, tends to be more optimistic and utopian.³⁸ In her analysis of critical spatial interventions in Toronto, Heather McLean has argued both approaches are necessary and crucial.³⁹ In an effort to explore potentialities without overlooking the issues and problems encountered by practitioners and participants, it is central to retain the validity of both analyses in order to unpack how urban practices “are directly and indirectly linked to larger political debates about gentrification and the territorialisation of the ‘creative class’ at a micro, neighbourhood level”⁴⁰, while at the same time challenging both tendencies to deterministic reductionism and to de-contextualised aesthetic criticism.

The second reflection concerned my ability to develop a research design that was critical of the de-contextualised ‘best practice’ approach discussed at the beginning of this chapter and explained in relation to recent literature on temporary urbanism. In order to attend to the situated complexities of a relationship with space and place, the ‘micro, neighbourhood level’ mentioned above, I had originally intended to study a small number of practices of temporary reuse from their

³⁷ May, T. 2001: *Social research: issues, methods and process*, p. 160.

³⁸ Harvie, J. 2009: *Theatre & the city*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 204-205.

³⁹ McLean, H. E. 2010: The politics of creative performance in public space. Towards a critical geography of Toronto case studies. In Edensor et al, *Spaces of vernacular creativity*, pp. 200-213.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 200.

inception to the end, to gain first hand experience of the embodied everyday dimensions of reuse and to follow the evolution of practitioners' and participants' relationship with the vacant spaces and with their surroundings. In the course of my preliminary observations I realised, however, that I had underestimated the fleeting temporary nature of self-organised projects, not simply in terms of the temporal duration of the projects, which were often much shorter than expected, but also in terms of the uncertainty of their realisation.

In relation to squatted social centres, for instance, by winter 2010 I had witnessed several fragile beginnings and drastic endings, which made it difficult to schedule regular participation and my potential future involvement. The increasingly fragmented and precarious landscape of London squatted social centres between 2009 and 2010 meant that occupations were relatively short-term and participation demanded availability for intensive but short-term involvement at a very short notice. During the preliminary phases of my research I had also observed the pragmatics of collective occupation, which often meant that only a core group of committed individuals with full-time availability would be able to participate in all stages of a squat. It became apparent that in order to become a full member of a core collective I would have needed to become a full time occupier, which would have most certainly meant that I could have not pursued engagement with any other practice or project. I thus decided to seek ways of participating in occupied spaces through solidarity exchanges, for instance by offering my house as a safe storage space, and through volunteering on regular days. My preliminary explorations thus enabled me to develop an awareness of the personal and analytic demands of participation and reflect on them as issues, as I realised that my inability to adopt a particular role offered insights into the "the operation of social power and relations in the setting under study"⁴¹.

The uncertainty and the requirement of total availability and flexibility also became an important obstacle to consistent participation in lawful practices of temporary vacant space reuse, as my strategy of following practitioners was often frustrated by delays and false starts.⁴² In late 2010, for instance, I began following

⁴¹ May, T. 2001: *Social research: issues, methods and process*. Buckingham: Open University Press, p. 155.

⁴² For instance, this was the case of the proposed Rathbone Market Space in Newham, which was to be run by an intermediary called Wasted Spaces.org. After a few email exchanges in January 2011 the project fell through and the group seemed to disappear from the scene.

the work of Group+Work, a collective of young artists who had recently won a public sector commission for a temporary project in a vacant shop in the inner London borough of Westminster. My first recorded conversation with the collective happened in January 2011 while they were in the process of finding a vacant shop, as I intended to follow the project from its inception through its end. As I explain in Chapter 3, however, the start of the project was delayed until Summer 2011, by which time I was already involved with two other practices of reuse. Following Group+Work practitioners in their initial quest provided rich material in relation to access, but did not materialise in a space or practice that could answer my questions on the practitioners' relationships with the vacant space, on organising and diverse economies. Similarly, the nomadic performance art collective ArtEvict that I had been following during my preliminary research stage, suddenly decided in February 2011 to 'settle down' into a rented warehouse space in Hackney.⁴³ Other practices discussed in Chapter 3 were very short-lived, such as the £100 Shop which I barely had a chance to witness and was able to study mainly through interviews and the collective's archival documentation.

The uncertainty of practices of temporary reuse thus became a central concern of my theoretical discussion of work and life precarity and of the projective logic of the discourse of reuse, as outlined in the previous chapter.⁴⁴ In terms of my methodology, from these experiences I drew the necessity of devising an ethnographic research framework that would enable me to study a temporally and spatially fluid and precarious discursive and practical field, and to maintain a wide angle of possible engagement with spaces and practices through active presence in networks of communities of practice. In choosing the projects and practices I was interested to follow more closely, I had to develop a pragmatic approach to the ways in which relationships were quickly established, so I kept myself available, flexible and connected with a range of networks of practitioners, I followed mailing lists and newsletter and attended events and social occasions to meet practitioners and activists.

⁴³ The venue was called]performance space[<http://www.performancespace.org/artevict.php> [accessed 22nd November 2012].

⁴⁴ A similar methodological point is raised by Angela McRobbie in her study of networked cultural work, see 2004: *Making a living in London's small-scale creative sector*. In Power, D. and Scott, A.J. (eds) *Cultural industries and the production of culture*. London: Routledge.

The third reflection concerned the political potential of temporary vacant space reuse. My questioning of the alterity of temporary practices in vacant spaces and their relationship to urban dynamics brought me to focus my attention on practices and projects that claimed to reuse vacant spaces to generate public open platforms. As I began to unpick the discourses and assumptions related to the artistic histories and current official endorsement of temporary ‘pop-up’ occupations, a connection became apparent between the types of spaces, particularly shop fronts, and the claim to public openness of the cultural activities that took place within them. Similarly, my preliminary observations of squatted spaces made me aware that in order to address the potential of squatted spaces to intervene in, expose and propose alternatives to existing urban power relations I needed to be selective of the types and intentions of squatted social spaces. I decided to focus on spaces such as infoshops and freeshops that claimed to be open and to engage with a wider public than that of the urban countercultural scenes, and which proposed models for what Jane Pickerill and Paul Chatterton have called the ‘power of interaction with society’ of autonomous practices.⁴⁵ In practice, this meant that I began looking for squatted social centres that experimented with open doors and on easily accessible locations, such as shop fronts on main streets.⁴⁶

From these three reflections on the need for a cultural materialist and performative approach, on the demands of flexibility and short-term nature of access and engagement, and on the need for focusing on community-oriented practices in vacant shop fronts, three main series of questions began to emerge. The first questions concerned the ways in which practices of vacant space reuse, particularly of vacant shop fronts, are portrayed by different actors and produce narratives and imaginaries about the connection between cultural production and the city. How are practices of vacant space reuse represented in discourse? What are its dominant representations and whose purpose do they serve, broadly and contingently? How are practitioners’ own representations differing from or complicit with mainstream representations, and why? What position-takings inhabit and produce the discursive field of temporary vacant space reuse in London? These questions demanded a

⁴⁵ Pickerill, J. and P. Chatterton 2006: Notes towards autonomous geographies: creation, resistance and self-management as survival tactics. *Progress in Human Geography* 30(6), p. 741.

⁴⁶ As will be explained in further detail in the following chapters, the experience of the squatted shop front ‘Non-Commercial House’ was a particularly important precedent for squatted shop fronts in East London.

discursive analysis of a variety of texts, from public documents to presentations to practitioners' own narratives, and a fairly broad overview of practices and spaces.

The second set concerned more specifically the material conditions of temporary vacant shop reuse, comprising the different social, legal, temporal and economic arrangements. How do practices originate and how are they sustained? Which urban actors are involved in shaping them and who benefits from them? Which formal and informal networks and institutions are practices of reuse connected to? Re-materialising reuse in this sense involved both an attention to the very material issues of real estate dynamics, changes in planning and processes of gentrification in inner London, and an attention to the ways in which claims and intentions translated into practical forms of engagement, and the reflections and emotions that accompanied them. Answering this set of questions required a more in-depth engagement with a selection of practices, their specific spatial, economic and social circumstances, and the relationship between their work and life precarity and the uncertain availability and short-term nature of their spatial occupations.

Lastly, the third set of questions is more specifically concerned with the potential of community-oriented practices of temporary reuse to intervene and challenge relations with vacant spaces, and to create alternative publicness and openness from previously closed sites. What kinds of experiences and performative encounters are produced through temporary vacant shop reuse? How do community-oriented practices engage with 'the public'? How are publics engendered and mediated by practitioners? How is openness negotiated? What kinds of emotions are produced? How do embodied experiences of urban temporary reuse relate to broader urban issues? These questions required a much more in-depth and continuative participation and observation of specific projects, and more sustained and ethnographic exposure to the everyday dimensions. The second half of this chapter will explain in more detail the methods adopted to answer each set of questions: to analyse a contested discursive field, to re-materialise practices, and to explicate performative encounters.

Analysing a contested discursive field

My first set of research questions concerned the discursive positions inhabited by practices of temporary vacant space reuse in contemporary London. My

preliminary interviews and observations of practices and space had revealed an ambiguous, complex and fluid range of discursive positions. In developing my research questions it became apparent that I would need to address the discourse of temporary vacant space reuse in London through a dynamic and embodied angle, and through an understanding of narratives and imaginaries as part of what Pierre Bourdieu's called 'a field of position-takings'. For Bourdieu, a 'field' does not arise from an overarching coherence in the position of participants or from an underlying consensus: the field is itself "the product and prize of a permanent conflict" over the production of meanings, and participation in this struggle becomes the main criterion for belonging to the field.⁴⁷ The discourse of temporary vacant space reuse is therefore relationally constituted through a process of establishing semi-stable meanings, which are, however, contingent and produced through power relations, both in the creating of discursive formations and in the struggle between them. For Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the incomplete character of discourse is what moves political struggles over the production of meaning.⁴⁸ In their theory of a 'field of discursivity' they developed the notion of the 'empty signifier' in politics, an empty discursive centre to be filled by competing discourses.⁴⁹ The idea that temporary vacant space reuse could act conceptually as an empty signifier for a variety of often contradictory narratives was useful to think about the object of my analysis as a set of performed and conflictive statements in dialogue and struggle with each other.

The performativity of discourse became clearer as I observed different players deploying a range of discursive strategies to gain access to spaces or funding, for instance, to maintain open alliances between very diverse networks, or to make a direct political intervention in wider debates. In the embodied and contingent performance of the discourse, narratives and imaginaries travelled and translated between different practitioners and actors, and produced complex alignments between proponents of radical self-organisation and spatial re-appropriation and publicly funded organisations promoting social urban entrepreneurialism. In reflecting on these utterances and statements, I tried to pay attention to their strategic

⁴⁷ Bourdieu, P. 1993: *The field of cultural production: essays on art and literature*: Polity Press, p. 34.

⁴⁸ See Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe 1985/2001: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

⁴⁹ Ibid. See also Ernesto Laclau's essay 'Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?' in Laclau, E. 1996: *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso, pp. 36-46.

political significance and to the urban publics, present or imagined, to which such narratives were addressed.⁵⁰ In order to understand position-takings I therefore mapped and identified sites where discourses of temporary vacant space reuse were produced and propagated. In Chapter 3 these positions have been roughly distinguished between ‘official’ narratives, meaning narratives produced and disseminated by policy-making, mainstream media and publicly funded institutions and organisations, and narratives ‘on the ground’, produced and performed by artists, activists and other spatial practitioners involved in projects of temporary reuse. In the course of the following chapters, I have tried to show how this artificial distinction comes undone through an attention to processes of circulation and translation, and to individual and collective moments of critical self-reflection.

I approached the first set of narratives through discourse analysis of primary sources, such as policy documents and official representations at public events and on online platforms and forums, and paid a specific attention to the visual and written languages deployed to represent vacant spaces and the projects that inhabited them. Key policies and official schemes were chosen on the basis of their visibility and frequent referencing in the discursive field, as well as on the basis of interviews with a selected number of public sector’s officials, cultural intermediaries and social entrepreneurs.⁵¹ As for public events and workshops, I deployed an ethnographic approach by following mailing lists, attending conferences, talks, openings and generally maintaining active e-mail communication with practitioners and intermediaries of the field.⁵² As will be explored in Chapter 3, public events were approached as crucial sites for the production and performance of meanings associated with temporary reuse. By recording my impressions through field notes I gained first hand experience of the ways in which practices and policies were discursively framed, and their relationship to existing urban imaginaries. Talks and events were also crucial sites to understand the preferred audiences of specific

⁵⁰ Rodgers, S., Barnett, C. and Cochrane, A. 2009: Mediating Urban Politics. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33, pp. 246-249.

⁵¹ This included formal interviews with the two founders of Meanwhile Space CIC (1st July 2011); with the main researcher on the Meanwhile Project (9th August 2011); a formal interview with an officer from the Regeneration Team of Newham Council responsible for the Meanwhile London Competition (27th September 2011); an interview with the manager of the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre (10th October 2011); as well as several informal conversations over an 18-month period with officers and professionals working in planning, architecture and urban policy-making in London.

⁵² For a complete list see Appendix 1.

arguments and rationales, and allowed me to be critically attentive to the ways in which ideas and narratives translated and transferred, and to unspoken assumptions, contradictions and elisions.

In order to approach the narratives of practitioners and activists on the ground, I chose to concentrate on forms of visual and textual self-representation. Cultural practitioners and activists are often very careful with the textual and visual materials that constitute the practices' public-facing presence in the field and an attention to forms of self-representation is one of the tenets of participatory research and is central to poststructuralist approaches that involve "carefully interrogating the potential effects of different languages and representations".⁵³ As argued by Angela McRobbie, all aspects of cultural practitioners' lives are "subjected to the logic of branding"⁵⁴ and a similar attention can be observed in the self-representation of activists, for whom the efficacy of a gesture or a project is heavily reliant on the symbolic value produced through the visual, textual and oral narratives that accompany it.⁵⁵ I therefore began archiving texts and images related to practices and projects of temporary reuse by collecting pamphlets, posters and publications, and by saving pages from blogs, websites, forums, mailing lists and social networks.⁵⁶ As will be explored in Chapter 4, online presence and promotion is central to short term reuse across all projects, from local authorities' pop-ups to squatted shop fronts. The Really Free School, for instance, a radical education collective of squatters briefly discussed in Chapter 3, made extensive use of their interactive online platform and mailing list to release real-time updates about new locations and activities and to urge participants to quickly propose classes and workshops.⁵⁷ Between the end of January and the beginning of April 2011 the collective had moved four times,

⁵³ Cameron, J. and Gibson, K. 2005: Participatory action research in a poststructuralist vein. *Geoforum* 36, p. 318.

⁵⁴ McRobbie, A. 2009: Reflections on Precarious Work in the Cultural Sector. In Lange, B., Stober, B. and Wellmann, I. (eds) *Governance der Kreativwirtschaft: Diagnosen und Handlungsoptionen*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, pp. 123-138.

⁵⁵ See, for instance, the visual and textual analysis undertaken by Melo on strategies of occupations. Melo, C. 2010: Performing sem-teto: the transversal tactics of *ativismo* and the squatters' movement. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia* 19, pp. 1-21.

⁵⁶ Rose, G. 2001: *Visual methodologies: an introduction to the interpretation of visual materials*. London: Sage, pp. 187-203.

⁵⁷ Really Free School collective, Communiqué 1, January 2011. Source: Reallyfreeschool.org [accessed 2nd February 2011].

staying in each squatted space between one and three weeks, so their online presence was crucial to their public communication strategy.⁵⁸

The practice of public photo documentation of short-term projects, moreover, is crucial to temporary urban projects, and the material publicly available was extensive. Geographer Gillian Rose has recently drawn on sociological debates to discuss how new digital forms of recording and communicating are producing vast social archives of visual and textual materials, which make discourse analysis a particularly daunting task.⁵⁹ The sheer amount of representations and the ways in which they are produced and disseminated made some of the customary modes of analysis impractical for the task of assessing fleeting, consumable images, produced and disseminated for fast consumption. In my analysis I therefore decided to select self-representations of practices and of spaces by focusing on texts that functioned as introductions to temporarily reclaimed spaces, such as ‘about us’ sections on websites and online forums, and on photographs and images that represented the shops, vacant or occupied, reused through temporary practices.

In both ‘official’ and ‘on the ground’ discourses of reuse, visual representations of empty spaces were important sites to articulate meanings. If wastelands and empty properties can be seen as “the morning after of our romance of the new”⁶⁰, the symbolic re-appropriation of vacant space is crucially also about superposing positive images of occupation and vibrancy over negative imaginaries of abandonment, vacancy and decay, particularly at times of recession. Images of vacant sites and of practices of occupation can thus be seen as complex signifiers whose meanings need to be critically addressed through an attention to their many sites of articulation. Drawing on Rose’s tripartite framework for a critical visual methodology, in my analysis of representations of practices of vacant space reuse I thus paid attention to the site of production, the site of the image, and the site of ‘audiencing’.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Informal conversation with members of The Really Free School collective, 10th February 2011.

⁵⁹ See for instance Gillian Rose’s reviews of recent publications on the subject of digital image production and analysis, such as Hartley, J. 2012: *Digital Futures for Cultural and Media Studies*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell and Hand, M. 2013: *Ubiquitous Photography*. Cambridge: Polity Press, on <http://visualmethodculture.wordpress.com/> [accessed 28th April 2013].

⁶⁰ Stam, R., and Shohat, E. 2002: Narrativizing Visual Culture (the aesthetic of garbage). In Mirzoeff, N. (ed.) *The Visual Culture Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 41-45.

⁶¹ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*.

The set of images presented in the three main chapters, and which included photographs and illustrations publicly available from policy reports, on the websites of intermediaries, local authorities and practitioners, and on online social networks, are therefore analysed in their visual content, in relation to their context and the agendas of their producers, and in their interpretations by various audiences. In my approach I was particularly attentive to the ways in which the portrayal of empty shops supported an argument for their reuse, through the choice of composition and the use of colours to highlight change. I compared the official visual narratives, which also included media representations, with projects and practices' self-representation, in texts and images, to reveal how the visual and textual tropes of temporary shop front reuse were reproduced or disrupted by practitioners and activists. My readings of such representation were critically informed by my understanding of practitioners' use of visual materials to strategically argue their positions in the field of temporary reuse.

The meanings associated with images of temporary shop front reuse, moreover, need to be addressed as produced through processes of viewing and interpreting which also demanded a questioning of their intended and unintended audiences. While online presence is central to practices of representations, in order to address this third 'audiencing' site and the embodied and material dimension of production of narratives, I began archiving hardcopy ephemeras, such as posters and leaflets, produced and deployed by practitioners in their practical promotion of their spaces. In the 'unstable and fugitive terrain' of short-term cultural and political practices, ephemeras constitute manifestations that are difficult to trace and record.⁶² As observed by Jaqueline Cooke in relation to the 'fringe' art scene, ephemeras are particularly important records of "transient and informal organizations and associated contingent strategies from the unstable and fugitive terrain of 'alternative' art activities" and a valuable "source of potential histories which might otherwise remain obscure" particularly for relational and performance-based practices.⁶³ Such archives were particularly important in my study, for example, of the proliferation of temporary squats and of projects in vacant shop front units inside the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre. As discussed in Chapter 5, I have analysed these ephemera

⁶² Cooke, J. 2006: Heterotopia: art ephemera, libraries and alternative space. *Art Documentation* 2, pp. 37-40.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 37.

in their role as props in the performance of openness, through participant observation of practices and sites.⁶⁴

Lastly, in addition to the more informal and casual conversations that were an integral part to my observation and participation in public and semi-public events, I also carried out a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews, some of which repeated over a period of time, with seventeen cultural practitioner and activists through the logic of research encounter outline earlier in this chapter.⁶⁵ In particular I was interested in practitioners and activists' references to accepted and sanctioned histories of art and political occupations, and to explore to what extent there was an awareness, on the ground, of the contradictions, slippages and transfers that had developed in the 'official' discourse. In this context, snowballing, in addition to being a recruiting method, was also important to understand the connections between apparently diverse practices of reuse, and confirmed my sense of a field not just of fluid discursive positions, but also of flexible practitioners who may collaborate with or support each other in relation to specific projects or events.

Talking about projects and connections often involved sharing information about participants' lives, confirming Angela McRobbie's observations on life/work biography as "the most reliable tool for charting pathways and forms of work and experience" in contexts of shifting and network work.⁶⁶ While some practitioners and activists requested that I anonymised their names, others were comfortable with being recognisable.⁶⁷ These interviews, which I insisted on calling conversations, enabled to explore "the retelling of certain geographies that are taken for granted because they emanate from authoritative sources",⁶⁸ and in so doing made possible to critically challenge mainstream narratives and genealogies of practices. In the course of my conversation with Werner, for instance, he had began by stating that artists had always organised exhibitions in vacant shops, but by the end of the interview he had corrected his narrative and admitted that the practice had really

⁶⁴ Rose, *Visual methodologies*.

⁶⁵ See Appendix 1.

⁶⁶ McRobbie, A. 2009: Reflections on Precarious Work in the Cultural Sector. In Lange, B., Stober, B. and Wellmann, I. (eds) *Governance der Kreativwirtschaft: Diagnosen und Handlungsoptionen*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, p. 137.

⁶⁷ As several participants pointed out in the course of our conversations, even when anonymised it would be easy to retrieve individual names from the title of a project or practice. The request to be anonymised could thus be seen more as an indication of petitioners' insecurity about the potential repercussions of expressing a critique of powerful urban agents, than as part of a calculated communication strategy.

⁶⁸ Pain, R. 2004: Social geography: participatory research. *Progress in Human Geography* 28, p. 653.

only taken hold since 2009 as local authorities have been awarding funds and “artists are all like ‘ah, you know, the council gives us the money to do this and that’”⁶⁹.

During such semi-structured interviews I also realised how terms such as ‘temporary reuse’ and ‘pop-ups’ were highly contested labels for a range of diverse practices, and I learnt how to carefully phrase my own representation of the practices and projects that I was researching. The encounters with my research participants thus became performative sites where rationales and languages were critically tested. This was especially visible in the case of the 10 practitioners whom I interviewed on more than one occasion, and particularly those involved in the four case studies on which I focused in Chapter 4 and 5. Analysing the transcripts of such conversations revealed similar conflicts and negotiations over the production of meanings to those analysed in the production of public statements. In attending to self-representation and self-reflexive narratives it was thus also important to retain a critical stance towards the discourses and narratives expressed by practitioners, and to be attentive to the ways in which narratives of the self or of one’s own practice are affected by the audience, the situation and my own presence as a researcher.⁷⁰ This allowed my research to be informed at all stages by a critical approach to the difficult politics of representing urban practices and spaces.

Re-materialising practices of temporary reuse

My approach to the second set of questions, which inform Chapter 4, meant that from a ‘field’ of practices and discourses I needed to develop a focus on a smaller selection of projects, to be studied in greater detail. In order to re-materialise practices which were often presented as disembodied and fleeting, I was interested in paying attention to the material circumstances that enable such projects to exist, from practitioners’ ability to access a space to the economic and social arrangements needed to run it, and their approach to local communities. In order to do so, I felt I needed a greater degree of access to the practices and to practitioners, and a more careful approach to which projects and practices to address. The process of deciding which practices of shop front reuse to study in greater detail was informed by an on-

⁶⁹ Conversation with Werner, 15th July 2010.

⁷⁰ Avis, H. 2002: Whose Voice is that? Making space for subjectivities in interviews. In Bondi, L. (ed.) *Subjectivities, knowledges and feminist geographies: the subjects and ethics of social research*. Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield, pp. 191-207.

going critical engagement with the different possible readings of temporary reuse categories offered by different actors in the field. The preliminary interviews, observations and participant observations that informed my study of the circulation of discursive formations were important to lay the ground for this selection.

Narrowing from the field of reuse in inner London, and from an initial selection of around ten experiences in vacant shop fronts, I decided to focus in greater detail on four. The criteria for selecting these four projects developed through an on-going process of critical examination of a range of commonalities and differences. Rather than creating typologies, I was interested in cross-examining practices as they embodied various compositions of intentions, strategies and practicalities. Accompanying my reasoning I used forms of listing and conceptual mapping to compare the practices under examination and to extricate differences and commonalities. Such diagrams were all part of a process of organising the material as I was undertaking my research, and as a method of sounding different approaches rather than as definite illustrations of the field.

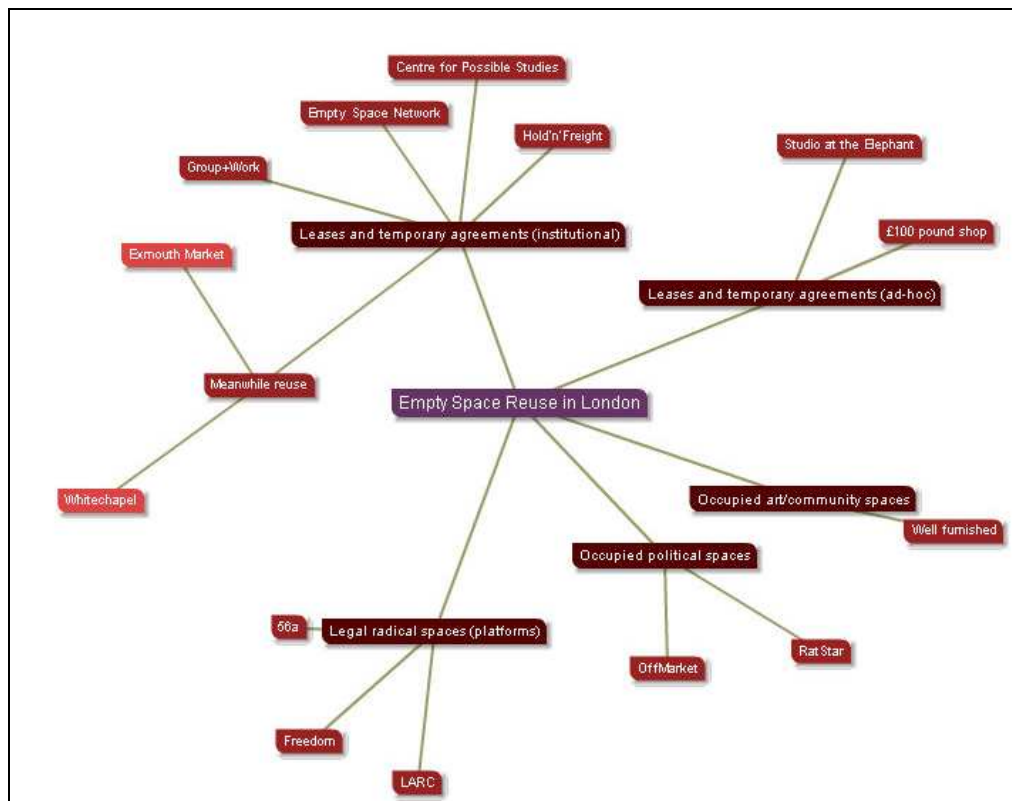


Figure 2.7 Preliminary conceptual mapping of projects of reuse, 22nd May 2011.

With the diagram of figure 2.7, for instance, I attempted to organised practices of reuse with which I was familiar first according to the legal framework

through which practitioners and activists gained access to use vacant spaces, and then in subgroups. On the top half I positioned practices that gained lawful access through policy schemes (such as Group+Work), institutional connections (such as the Centre for Possible Studies) and direct negotiations (such as Studio at the Elephant); on the bottom half I placed those practices and collectives that operated through direct action interventions and unlawful occupations (such as the squatted social centres OffMarket, Well Furnished and Ratstar).

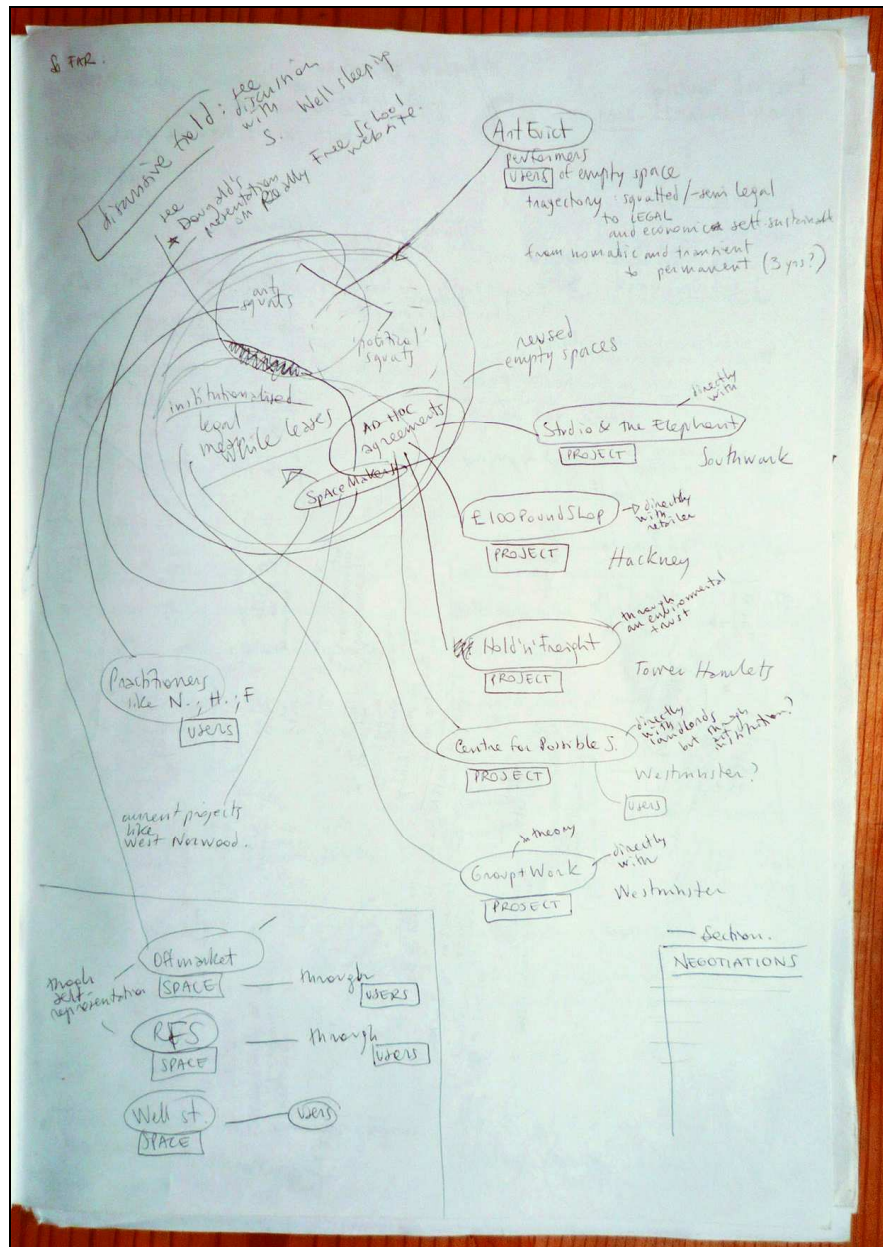


Figure 2.8 Conceptual diagram 18th March 2011

Figure 2.8 presents a slightly different arrangement, as I differentiated between ad-hoc arrangements and institutional agreements, as well as between practices that

started, both practically and conceptually, as 'projects' before the encounter with a specific vacant site, and those practices – indicated as 'spaces' (on the bottom left hand side) – whose name, identity and aims were generated by and through the occupation of a vacant site.

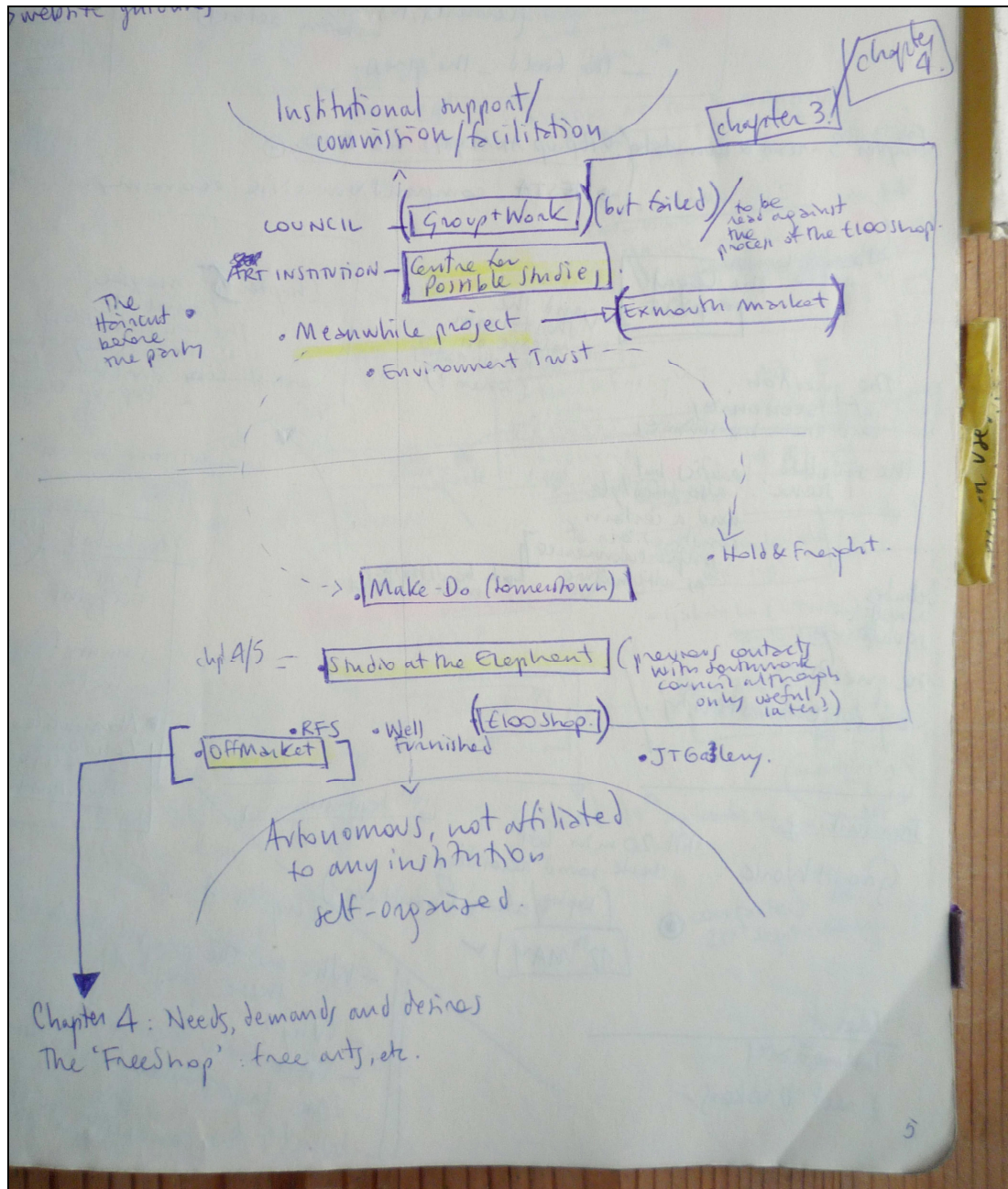


Figure 2.9 Conceptual diagram April-September 2011.

In figure 2.9 I spatially distributed a smaller selection of practices along an axis indicating a tension between two opposite forms of organisation: institutional and self-organised. As I compared my conceptual maps with the geo-referenced

archive of temporary shop front reuse in inner London discussed earlier, I was also interested in choosing projects across a range of boroughs, as that would offer insights into different degrees of policy intervention, such as through ‘pop-up shop’ support schemes and funds, into borough-specific or relevant neighbourhood-specific networks of spaces, practitioners and activities and into dynamics of shop front vacancy. Figure 2.10 indicates the location of the four main practices under detailed examination in relation to inner city London borough boundaries. The map also shows how three of my case studies occupied a series of vacant shop fronts within the same neighbourhoods, which indicate the projects’ intention to focus on a specific area, as will be discussed in further detail.

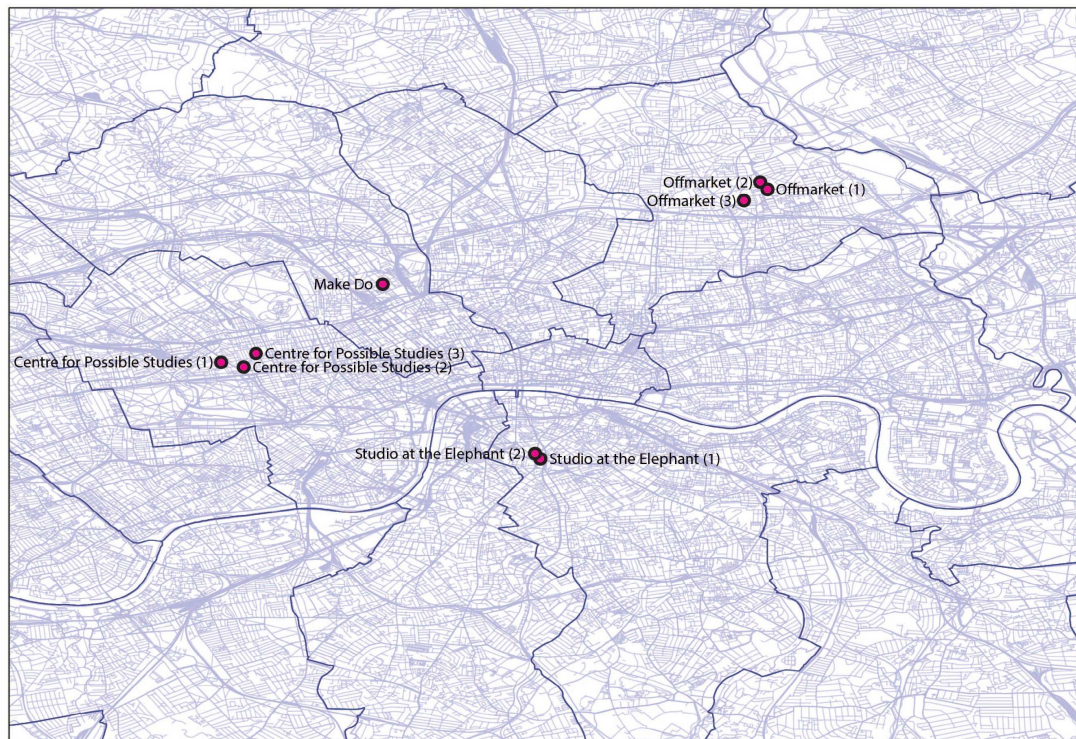


Figure 2.10 The four main projects of shop front reuse in relation to four inner city London borough boundaries (from left to right: Westminster, Camden, Southwark and Hackney).

Each of the four practices was approached at a different time and under different circumstances, and offered different possibilities for actively participating in the activities of the spaces. The first practice I encountered, Studio at the Elephant, was a community-art project in a vacant shop front inside the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, in north Southwark. I came across the shop in November 2010 during one of my regular visits to Elephant and Castle and informally talked about the space with the artist who had initiated the two-week project. As the project

was successful, she joined forces with a second artist, and the duo arranged to run the project from another shop front in the centre between March and June 2011. Over 12 months I carried out six in-depth semi-structured interviews with the two organisers at different intervals, as well as with two of the artists involved in their programme, as well as with a representative of the Shopping Centre. The knowledge gained through conversations was supplemented through regular visits to the space and informal conversations with other practitioners and volunteers during the four months of the Studio.

In terms of active participation, as discussed in Chapter 4 the two artists were working on the project very intensively and had a close dynamic between them, and participation in the programme beyond informal conversations during the ‘open door’ days relied on their invites. I thus took part in two events in their space, a round table discussion and a staged dinner conversation. My sound recordings of conversations with the organisers were then donated to their archive, and a network mapping of volunteers that we drew together in the course of one of our conversations was re-drawn and adapted by the practitioners for the last double page spread of their book *Studio at the Elephant* (2012).⁷¹ The project took place within the broader context of the Elephant and Castle Regeneration, a program of demolitions and refurbishment led by Southwark Council as part of one of London’s Opportunity Areas for Development (London Plan 2011) and involving several private real estate developers, such as the owners of the Shopping Centre.⁷² In Chapter 5, I discuss the regeneration as a discursive and material framework to understand the reason for the existence of vacant shops and the role of temporary projects of reuse within the shopping centre, and critically integrate practitioners’ accounts with in-depth research in local development plans gained through my long-term involvement with local groups and campaigns in the area.⁷³

My involvement with the second project of temporary shop front reuse, the squatted OffMarket, drew on two years of participation and sometimes facilitation of events and meetings in a series of squatted social spaces across South, East and North London, and particularly since late 2010 with occupied venues in the boroughs

⁷¹ Davies, R. and Sajovic, E. 2012: *Studio at the Elephant*. London: Studio at the Elephant.

⁷² GLA 2011: *The London Plan*. See also <http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/planning/london-plan> [accessed 21st March 2013].

⁷³ Including, since 2010, being a member of the local community group Elephant Amenity Network (<http://elephantamenity.wordpress.com/>) and being a member of Southwark Notes Archives Group.

of Hackney. Participation in various squatted social spaces had made me aware of the need to live or work in the proximity of the site and to be available at short notice in case of emergencies, shortfall in the volunteers, or for any other practical matter.⁷⁴ While I had been visiting and observing the first OffMarket, and had even organised a few meetings in the space since January 2011, I felt I could truly offer my support only after March 2011, when I moved to a house fifteen minutes away from the second occupied shop. There was a system in place to enable new people to participate in the space without having to become members of the core collective, so I started volunteering on a freeshop shift once a week between May and July, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. My knowledge of the functioning of the space, its diverse economies and internal organisation was therefore grounded in my role as a participant and volunteer, and integrated with informal conversations with members of the collective after the space had been evicted. In hindsight, I was particularly drawn to Studio at the Elephant and to the OffMarket as they took place within neighbourhoods that I felt familiar with, which I thought would enable me to better address their performance of ‘publicness’ as explored in Chapter 5.⁷⁵ In addition, by pursuing a strategy of flexibility and openness, I was able in both cases to witness their first shop front and to build a relationship with the practitioners and activists that would allow me to participate, to different degrees, in their second spaces.

The other two practices built on very different connections and forms of access. The third project was the Centre for Possible Studies, an art, research and education centre affiliated with the Serpentine Gallery, located around Edgware Road in the Westminster. My knowledge of the Centre was based on prior and unrelated friendships with the two main organisers of the space. One of them had previously funded and managed a temporary art space in a railway arch, which we discussed in the course of one of my preliminary conversations. Between late 2009 and late 2011 I was a regular visitor of the three sites occupied by the project, and attended events, screenings and talks. Building on several informal conversations, in June 2011 I finally decided to record a long in-depth semi-structured interview with

⁷⁴ For example, when the OffMarket was raided by London Metropolitan Police, on the eve of the Royal Wedding in April 2011, two volunteers were detained, later released without charges, and the front window was shattered. An immediate call out for volunteers was sent out both to bring support to the detainees and to help cleaning the glass from the pavement and from the inside, and to build a wooden door to secure the space.

⁷⁵ Mahony, N., J. Newman, and C. Barnett 2010: *Rethinking the public: innovations in research, theory and politics*. Bristol: Policy, pp. 8-9

one of the organisers, focusing in particular on those less visible aspects of the project, such as the process of accessing the site, which I integrated with archival research about local policies and regeneration schemes. The conversations had with the participants of Studio at the Elephant earlier in 2011 on the importance of institutional backing partially drove my decision to gain a more in-depth understanding of this project which, contrary to the other three experiences, was fully funded, although the shop fronts were leased rent-free.

Finally, in summer 2011, I decided to study in more detail Make Do, a six-week programme of activities that took place in a vacant shop front in Somers Town, Camden, in November and December 2010. I had been following the work of the initiator of Make Do, Mariana, since her involvement in the Market Estate Project, a temporary art residency in soon-to-be demolished high-rise residential buildings in the Market Estate in Islington, in March 2010.⁷⁶ I was introduced via email by a common acquaintance when I heard about Mariana's intention to run a temporary shop front during summer 2010, but as I received no reply I assumed that either the project had taken place already or that the plans had come to nothing. In fact, the project appeared suddenly in winter 2010. On the day I visited the site, the shop was not open, despite being one of their 'open to the public days', and I had given up the idea until the project was mentioned to me in July 2011 by Meanwhile Space' organisers as one of their successful case studies. A few weeks later, by complete coincidence I met Mariana in person at an event about creative cities, where I was introduced to her by a writer whom I had previously met through another project of temporary reuse, Studio at the Elephant.⁷⁷ Following this meeting I interviewed Mariana twice during August 2011 and gained access to the digital archive of the project's documentation.⁷⁸ The choice of studying the Centre for Possible Studies and Make Do came at a later stage in my fieldwork, and was informed by the conceptual mappings and ways of organising the 'field' that I was in the process of studying. Despite the different negotiations, temporalities and funding situations, both the Centre for Possible Studies and Make Do arranged their access to the shops

⁷⁶ The Market Estate Project, see <http://www.marketestateproject.com/> [accessed 12th October 2011].

⁷⁷ This was the final workshop of the Creative Cities Limits series of events, 29th July 2011. <http://creativecitylimits.wordpress.com/> [accessed 23rd March 2012].

⁷⁸ On 9th August and 17th August 2011.

within already existing frameworks⁷⁹, which I felt offered important elements of comparison with the self-organised and self-managed Studio at the Elephant and OffMarket.

Performative and emotional public encounters

The third set of questions further addresses the experiential dimension of practices of temporary reuse through an attention to the embodied politics of ‘publicness’ and ‘openness’ of community-oriented project. These questions expand on the necessity to re-materialise temporary reuse, as discussed previously, by drawing attention to the public and collective dimension of spatial appropriation, and the emergent relations they can engender. In this, I have drawn upon the theoretical debates recently developed around calls for re-materialising human geographies and its implications for critical literature on the urban.⁸⁰ Borrowing from Alan Latham and McCormack’s expanded understanding of ‘urban materialities’, my attention with this set of questions turns both to the ‘actual’ and to the ‘virtual’ materialities of urban reuse, to address the question of the intensity of relations that can be engendered through public encounters, and their emergent political potential.⁸¹ In my study of temporary pop-up shop reuse, this means to understand and analyse the strategies of engagement of practitioners and organisers with the ‘public’, but also the processual and relational dimension of occupying and ‘opening up’ spaces and negotiating intersubjective encounters.

As argued in the previous chapter, the official logic of temporary reuse points to the idea of ‘staging’ positive experiences to work on the perception of urban places. Performance in this view was understood as a public display of urban vibrancy as ‘acting out’ positive creative activities to an audience, and the

⁷⁹ As will be discussed in Chapter 4, in the case of Make Do this was the Meanwhile Space’s network and Camden Council’s pop-up shop scheme; in the case of the Centre for Possible Studies a long-term community outreach programme called the Edgware Road Project run by the Serpentine Gallery.

⁸⁰ See Lees, L. 2002: Rematerializing geography: the ‘new’ urban geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 26(1), pp. 101-112; and Philo, C. 2000: More words, more worlds: reflections on the ‘cultural turn’ and human geography. In Cook, I., Crouch, D., Naylor, S. and Ryan, J. (eds) *Cultural turns/geographical turns: Perspectives on cultural geography*. Harlow: Prentice Hall, pp. 26-53.

⁸¹ Latham, A., and D. P. McCormack 2004: Moving cities: rethinking the materialities of urban geographies. *Progress in Human Geography* 28(6), pp. 701-724. See also Jane M. Jacobs’s discussion of the implications of this debate for thinking the relationally about urban mobilities: Jacobs, J.M. 2012: Urban geographies I: Still thinking cities relationally. *Progress in Human Geography* 36, pp. 412-422.

expectation of openness became apparent in the case of community-oriented activist spaces too. The community-oriented practices of temporary reuse under examination were therefore to be approached as inhabiting the expectation of performance with their own rationale and agendas, which I tried to unravel through self-reflective conversations with practitioners. At the same time, in order to critically address the claims of the coordinators of temporary spaces, it was important to ground my understanding in a familiarity and experience of the neighbourhoods, which in this case were Elephant and Castle, in Southwark, where I used to live and where I was still involved in local community organising around planning issues, and Lower Clapton in Hackney, where I moved to during the second year of my research.

In order to address the public dimension of reuse I paid particular attention to the importance of talking about the practices while on site or in its proximity.⁸² In my study of temporary projects of shop front reuse inside the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, as discussed in Chapter 5, I undertook situated conversations and mobile interviews with practitioners as well as with a Shopping Centre's employee inside the shop or in its proximity. The act of sitting in the space and of walking around and explaining its position in relation to the movement of shoppers or the connection with adjacent traders, was crucial to gain an embodied understanding of agendas and strategies of public engagement. The physical presence in the space acted as a prompt for discussing the layout of the site, its uses and the relationship of the shop to other sites and practices in the centre. It also engendered a setting for eliciting more situated accounts of the emotional and embodied geographies of reuse, which provided an additional sensuous dimension to these conversations, as the lived experiences of encounters were re-imagined and performed again. Similarly in the case of the OffMarket, all informal conversations with members of the collective and other volunteers took place during my active participation in the space.⁸³

In order to address the 'staging' of the performance of temporary occupation I also drew on my extensive participant observation to identify props, speech-acts and strategies of openness that practitioners and activists used to facilitate public participation in the space. In my understanding, the public use of the site was part of

⁸² As explored in my scoping interview with a curator and organiser of a vacant space project that had ended two years earlier, being on the site brought back a host of emotions as she commented on the intensity of being back. Scoping interview with Samira, 17th August 2010.

⁸³ Except for one that took place several months after the eviction in a safe house nearby the site.

an ongoing process of performing spatial occupation, and had to be addressed through the notion of performativity, according to which identities and interpellations are produced through reiteration but are not determined fully in advance.⁸⁴ Through keeping a participant diary I focused my attention on the sensuous and performative dimension of open and public use.⁸⁵ The observations gained by attending public events and open days and participating in a project also allowed for a different take on the spatialities and temporalities of these spaces that may not surface in the practitioner's self-representation, which is particularly important in assessing claims to facilitating community spaces alternative to mainstream urban uses.⁸⁶ I was particularly attentive to the audience (demographics, ways of dressing, ways of behaving), the visual and textual material that frames the event (writings, flyers, general aesthetic), and the permeability between the empty space and the street: whether it was open to passers-by, how it addressed them, whether it was inviting or hidden, whether elements of the inside space overflowed to the outside and how. I also paid particular attention to the way the new space and its audience were receptive to its surroundings, whether they 'blended in' or whether they created visual or embodied contrasts to it.⁸⁷ In doing so I was interested in the political potential of staging, and the 'dramaturgy of dissent' analysed by Alex Vasudevan in relation to the performative strategies of political squats in Berlin. Citing one of the occupiers of the Berlin squat K77, Vasudevan argues that "an embodied and practical understanding of the built environment is crucial to the design of potential spaces for future commons", pointing in the direction of the performative dimension of temporary vacant space reuse as prefigurative of potentially different forms of inhabiting the city.⁸⁸

The performance of openness also involved a display of the community-orientation of the practice and of the relationships and encounters that the space

⁸⁴ Butler, J. 1993: *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge, p. 95.

⁸⁵ Paterson, M. 2009: Haptic geographies: ethnography, haptic knowledges and sensuous dispositions. *Progress in Human Geography* 33, pp. 766-788.

⁸⁶ See the methodology deployed by Crewe, L., Gregson, Nicky and K. Brooks in the chapter 'Alternative Retail Spaces' where they contrast the glamorous self-representation of retro retailing with the everyday dimension of, for instance, invigilating an empty space. In Leyshon, A., Lee, R. and Williams, C.C. (eds), 2003: *Alternative economic spaces*, London: SAGE, pp. 74-106.

⁸⁷ See for example Harvie's discussion of the audience's behaviour in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London. Harvie, J. Agency and complicity in 'A Special Civic Room': London's Tate Modern Turbine Hall. In D. J. Hopkins, S. Orr, and K. Solga (eds) 2009: *Performance and the city*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 204 - 221.

⁸⁸ Vasudevan, A. 2011: Dramaturgies of dissent: the spatial politics of squatting in Berlin, 1968-. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12(3), pp. 283-303.

facilitates. Both Studio at the Elephant and the OffMarket claimed to offer a ‘platform’ for communities but, despite the evasiveness of the term, spaces are never neutral ‘platforms’ and openness to users has to be actively negotiated, which involves the setting of implicit and explicit dynamics of access and participation. Through different levels of participation, observation and interviews, I addressed these dynamics as narrated by practitioners and as understood or challenged by external visitors and audiences. The question of the users and the publics of these projects was central to the practices’ self-representation. The attention to the ‘emerging publics’ of temporary projects of reuse discussed in the previous chapter had to be accompanied by the ability to analyse critically the dynamics of facilitating openness and its relation to the process of claim-making, which could reveal the circulation and production of normative values and imaginaries of ‘publicness’. The ‘emerging publics’ of a neighbourhood undergoing rapid urban change could point in very different directions that may challenge or reproduce existing forms of exclusions. In my analysis, the stress on processes and performances was therefore accompanied by an awareness of the significance of “stubborn, sticky attachment to things and identities”.⁸⁹

Finally, I was concerned with open door temporary spaces as sites for encounters that could initiate intense emotional and affective processes of becoming. In my semi-structured interviews with practitioners, the performance of public openness was often described with a very vivid emotional language that revealed the intense embodied dimension of presence in the space. By analysing the feelings and interpretations offered by practitioners, I was interested in their reflection on the immaterial labour of such projects, which often surfaced in practitioners’ discussion of the difficulty of defining the ‘work’ of temporary reuse, as explored in Chapter 4. Through long-term engagement, I was fortunate to establish a relationship with practitioners at Studio at the Elephant, possibly facilitated by my openness about my own emotional involvement with the local politics of the area. My participation in public and semi-public events, and my own position as both a resident and a member of the audience, moreover, offered situated observations as a counterpart to practitioners’ own accounts.

⁸⁹ Mahony, Newman, and Barnett, *Rethinking the public*, p. 172.

My participation as a volunteer in the OffMarket project was also crucial for sounding issues of embodiment, performativity and emotional and affective geographies. After two years in the activist and squatters scene I had developed a degree of familiarity with forms of relating and acting, with the expected behaviours within a squatted space and with the performance of militant occupation to be presented to outside visitors. My experience of the OffMarket and the openness of the shop deeply challenged my own positionality as an activist and as a Hackney resident, through the brief encounters of visitors, but most importantly through my voluntary work alongside people with whom I would have probably never crossed paths, despite living in the same neighbourhood, because of their income, age and appearance. The embodied politics of sharing and negotiating the use of space with volunteers 'from the community' constantly challenged my own position as a white university-educated young woman and a migrant, in an area of drastic demographic changes and gentrification. The analysis of my own experience revealed the extent to which the privileging of an emotional geographies' approach seemed insufficient to understand how encounters in the space challenged my positionality and produced conflicted and complex forms of affectual becoming.

As discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, every time I volunteered in the freeshop my motives and politics were challenged by the affective relations engendered through the non-monetary economies of the space and by brief everyday exchanges with other volunteers and users. Before I began volunteering in the space, for instance, I had supported the freeshop by donating unused clothes and objects, and actively encouraged friends to do the same. When I started volunteering, I refrained from taking anything from the shop, as I still implicitly perceived my position as one of charitable giver towards 'needier' users and volunteers. Without realising it, my approach was undermining ideas of mutual aid among equals and was contrary to the space's refrain 'solidarity not charity'.⁹⁰ After a few shifts my attitude was indirectly challenged by another volunteer, a single mother in her early forties, who lived locally in a sheltered accommodation and who worked on the side as tailor to make extra income. During the freeshop shifts she often took garments and spare pieces of fabric to tailor models to sell, and took pride in saying that she had always worked, and that if she lived in sheltered accommodations at the

⁹⁰ Diary entry, 31st May 2011.

moment, that was not for lack of trying. She always encouraged me to take anything I wanted, just like she did, because it was ‘free for everyone’.

The change in my approach did not, of course, change the structural inequalities that enabled me to volunteer in the space while on a research scholarship, or my position of privilege compared to other volunteers and users of the space. It did however change my ability to work alongside other users and to inhabit more critically the politics of equality that I professed. As discussed in Chapter 5, the day-to-day experience of volunteering in the space was often highly emotional, and the sense of unease and urgency engendered by entering into direct contact with urban dispossession and despair lingered well beyond the short-term duration of the squatted shop front, and in retrospect these small exchanges constituted the most powerful and transformative political dimension of the project. The encounters and the affective dynamics they engendered showed me the critical ambiguity of the ‘freeness’ of the space and its exchanges, which is discussed in Chapter 5, and my embodied critique could be shared with other volunteers in subsequent reflections on the scripted performance of openness of the space, and its prefigurative potential.

Reflections on access and reciprocity

The ethnographic framework deployed in my research raised a series of ethical issues with regards to my own positionality across a contested field. In order to explore the many facets of the discourse of temporary vacant space reuse, and to lay the basis for my in-depth analysis of practices, I had to be able to gain access to a range of different sites, individuals and groups. Some of them embodied approaches to urban interventions that I did not agree with, and were proponents of narratives of which I was highly critical even before beginning my field research. However, as I began exploring the competing discourses and subject-positions of the field of temporary vacant shop reuse in inner London, I realised that I needed to keep my initial questions and approach open to views and arguments that conflicted with my activist-research standpoint. Following the idea that a militant investigation is open to processes of becoming through ‘situations’ and encounters, I found myself carefully negotiating the language I used, the concepts I was employing, and trying to privilege listening over judging in the course of conversations. To keep this initial

openness, particularly when ‘studying up’ and approaching managers, local government officials and intermediaries of temporary pop-up projects, I devised different ways of presenting myself and my research project, which I learnt through trial and error by reflecting on the responses or lack of responses that I received in relation to the strategies of access and the language deployed in my approach.

For instance, several exploratory emails sent from my university email account to the general contact details found on websites went unanswered, and even after a few exchanges it was difficult to ask for a one-to-one meeting and many turned to be false leads.⁹¹ I soon realised that despite the online presence of many pop-up projects, sending unsolicited emails was not a successful strategy, in contrast to attending open events and introducing myself directly to the organisers. In the case of Meanwhile Spaces CIC, for instance, after an email sent in May 2011 received no reply, I attended the opening of their new pop-up shop in Exmouth market in June 2011, introduced myself in person, and followed up with an email from my personal email account.⁹² I also realised that before a meeting could be set, practitioners would first research my profile online, so I carefully phrased the available information about my research proposal on the official university web profile as to remain open and rather elusive. Moreover, in my introduction to powerful urban agents I always stressed my arts background and my interest in cultural projects and in the emotional dimensions of temporary reuse, as a calculated ‘soft’ approach that enabled me, though the semi-structured interviews, to access justifications and narratives.

A stress on arts and creativity as opposed to urban politics was strategic to my positioning. For instance, during the semi-structured interview with one of the founders of Meanwhile Space CIC, my educational background, my way of dressing and behaving led him to mention, without any prompting, the fact that a squatter had contacted him via email for advice. This led my interviewee to discuss at some length the relationship between ‘meanwhile uses’ and squatting, and the difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ squatters, which was essential to demarcate the political position of the Meanwhile project while it acknowledged its debt to a far more

⁹¹ For instance this was the case for the Make Do project; the Shop: Farm project in Dalston; and the Wasted Space group.

⁹² Direct personal contact with new individual through the open shop was discussed as an important element of their project beyond their online presence, as was revealed by members of Meanwhile Space CIC during our conversation.

radical tradition of political occupations, as discussed in Chapter 3. The success of this interview opened my way to interviewing Fred about the Meanwhile London Competition. My position as an academic researcher and my ability to speak the neutral language of policy-making encouraged him to discuss freely the agendas of economic development behind the competition's 'alternative' narrative. In both cases, as well as with the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre employee, the interviews were considered part of their everyday public relations; the increasing popularity of 'pop-up shops' as a topic for academic research was also helpful, as jokingly remarked during my conversation with the Meanwhile Space's founders: "I think this is the first PhD we have had... masters students are 10 a penny!"⁹³.

Establishing relations with cultural practitioners involved in projects of temporary reuse proved more difficult. As discussed by Angela McRobbie in her critique of traditional methodological approaches, the field of cultural work "appears to comprise of free-floating individuals brought together according only to the requirements of this or that short term project. The sociology of individualisation finds itself challenged by the reality of non-groups, non labour markets, non-institutions".⁹⁴ The flipside of this free-floating cultural scene was a highly sophisticated awareness of the contacts and networks that practitioners inhabited, and of the potential negative effects of critiquing a project or a practice, which made practitioners very cautious before granting access to information and engaging in critical conversations. Even those who belonged to my social networks required several email exchanges and preliminary meetings to discuss the aims and objectives of my research before granting permission to sound record our conversations. Moreover, most of my interviewees were highly educated at a Masters level, many had taught in colleges and universities at some point in their lives, so it was not sufficient to present them with a broad research question, and they often demanded a full presentation of my theoretical and practical research project. For example, I became aware of the £100 Shop project through a personal email from one of the artists, whom I had met several times before and with whom I shared several interests. Yet, when I approached him for an interview, it was necessary to have a preliminary meeting off record to explain my research questions (4th February 2011),

⁹³ Conversation with Meanwhile Space CIC founders, 1st July 2011.

⁹⁴ McRobbie, A. 2004: Making a Living as a Visual Artists in London's Small Scale Creative Economy. In Power, D. and Scott, A.J. (eds) *Cultural industries and the production of culture*, London: Routledge, pp. 134-5.

before he agreed to arrange a group interview with his collaborators in the project (1st March 2011).

Similarly, in the case of Studio at the Elephant, while permission to audio record our conversation was immediately granted by one practitioner in December 2010, it was denied at our follow-up meeting in February 2011 as the newly formed artist duo were in the preliminary stages of negotiating access to their new space in the shopping centre, and did not want to jeopardise their chances by divulging critical information.⁹⁵ Since I had been very honest and upfront in my initial exchange with the practitioner, in the occasion of this renegotiation of access I reflected about the degree to which exposure of my politics could be detrimental to gaining access, while I decided to pursue an honest exchange:

I feel that I need to let trust to be built between us, and my critical position is uncompromising but needed. Without it, I wouldn't be respecting them. It's important that my position as a researcher is not coached in false neutrality.

What is good about this [research] project is precisely the fact that I have a history in the area, an opinion and an interest. Mine is situated knowledge.⁹⁶

My critical position and personal political involvement in the issues under study were acknowledged by the practitioners in their publication, where I feature as a member of the Elephant Amenity Network, a local community group, and of a London-based art/activist collective campaigning against unpaid labour in the cultural sector, despite the fact that I had approached them as a PhD researcher. The multiple subject-positions that I inhabited in the course of my research demanded careful reflection on the ways in which practitioners performed different roles and narratives over time and in response to my own input in the conversations.

In terms of my epistemological position, I wanted to value practitioners as knowers and to address them as highly self-reflexive subjects by initiating forms of horizontal dialogue and by sharing the development of my own critical thinking. In doing so I opened myself to questioning and criticism, and to retain access to practices and practitioners I had to carefully negotiate and be attentive to encounters as moments in which “both parties are vulnerable experiencing subjects working to coproduce knowledge”.⁹⁷ A curator who had run one of the pop-up art exhibitions in

⁹⁵ Diary entry, 12th February 2011.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Tedlock, B. 2003: Ethnography and Ethnographic representations. In Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln,

the Elephant and Castle shopping centre, for instance, openly questioned my lack of a specific geographic boundary and my rationale for choosing Elephant and Castle above other areas, such as Hackney, where there was a widely known local authority's scheme for pop-ups and where emerging artists notoriously live and run temporary art venues.⁹⁸ The openness to questioning my own approach and research also involved accepting the challenge of the knowledge that I could bring to these conversations. While initially I thought conversations would develop horizontally, as between two 'practitioners', my repositioning as an urban researcher made practitioners expect me to be able to respond on issues of urban economics, from rising rent prices to the logic of urban development and real estate speculation. In order to engage on this level, I thus found myself researching in far more depth than originally planned the histories and policies of the neighbourhoods inhabited by the temporary projects. The result was a series of long semi-structured conversations in which information about urban planning, policy and economies could be shared on different levels, and new questions could be raised.⁹⁹

While I wanted to study processes that responded or echoed my concerns in critical dialogue with practitioners, I also wanted to grasp different subject positions and forms of intelligibility of urban dynamics. My willingness to learn to speak a range of languages used to narrate urban change, and to understand a variety of justifications and reasoning, became a constant challenge to the rationale for my own research as my empathy towards precarious practitioners when they were sharing emotional accounts would sometimes surprise me at the moment of analysing the transcripts, and revealed the ambiguous development of my own positioning. By trying to follow a logic of inquiry open to participants' languages and practices, I was also open to my own transformation through "intersubjective and embodied, [...] social and processual" experiences.¹⁰⁰ In the development of an emerging research design, I experienced the frantic pace of keeping myself open and available to following temporary practices, projects and spaces, and the fast-paced changes in

Y.S. 2003: *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*. London: Sage, p. 184.

⁹⁸ I had to explain the logic of my inquiry: my feminist epistemology, and my desire to ground my analysis into an embodied personal knowledge of an area (Elephant and Castle) where I had lived and where I was involved in on-going campaigns around planning issues.

⁹⁹ These exchanges were very enriching, and practitioners often openly thanked me saying that they hadn't thought about the city in that way, or that they hadn't realised the connections between their personal experiences and broader urban dynamics.

¹⁰⁰ May, T. 2001: *Social research: issues, methods and process*, p. 191.

policy and in the legal and economic landscape, spending my time quite literally running around the city, visiting sites, meeting individuals and groups and participating in events. This was driven by the knowledge that the most recent ‘pop-up shop’ or occupied social centre could only last a few weeks, within which it might only be open to the public over a few days.

The methodological question raised at the beginning of this chapter of how to research temporary spaces whose temporal and spatial coordinates are uncertain and in flux, was thus answered by immersing myself in a state of experiential intensity that came from being involved in hectic and fluid short-term social relations and spaces distributed across a vast metropolis. By the middle of my investigation, I began to see important parallels between the frantic pace of my field research and the hectic rhythm of scouting for spaces, programming and organising experienced by practitioners. The experience of researching practices of ‘temporary urbanism’ demanded not just a constant availability to witness and observe urban ‘events’, but also to inhabit, as a researcher, the unpredictable chase of spaces and people that characterised the experience of coordinators. Moreover, in this process I learnt and interiorised the particular ways in which practitioners’ looked at vacant spaces: as ‘spaces of opportunity’ for entrepreneurial activities, as phrased in the official narratives, and as cracks to be exploited by anti-capitalist forms of social organisation, as in squatting strategies. During my field work I began to read the city ‘from the vacancy angle’: temporary empty shops, boarded-up buildings and fenced vacant lots increasingly sprung to the foreground, while the city’s places of full occupancy became relegated, in my field of vision, to the background.¹⁰¹

Temporariness thus became, from an object of analysis, a condition for its research. The ‘becoming-temporary’ of my engagement with the city revealed unsuspected spaces, dynamics and logics, but also the limits of a purely ethnographic and participatory approach. In my critical self-reflection of the processes of transformation that I underwent, it became apparent that practitioners’ celebration of alterity, interstitiality and nomadism could be seen as an interiorised strategy to cope with their own precarity and with the increasing social inequalities and spatial foreclosures of contemporary London.¹⁰² By immersing myself in the field of

¹⁰¹ Diary entry, 21st April 2011.

¹⁰² On this issue I am indebted to Julia Wedel’s reflections on the ambiguity of strategies of flexibility in the experience of urban and rural scarcity, as in her 2013 paper presentation ‘The cost of

temporary reuse and embodying this precarious standpoint, I risked interiorising the blind spots of the discourse of temporary urbanism, that is the ability to critically assess its claim to alterity. To address the latter it was thus necessary for me to remove myself from the exciting and intense flux of events, projects and experiences of temporary reuse and discover the incredible richness of what I had been able to witness and be part of during my research. A critical approach to the alterity of temporary reuse and the idea of 'temporary urbanism' should therefore comprise both an experiential wedding to the intense flux of urban temporariness, and an essential ability to remove oneself and analyse the relationship between the emotional and affective geographies of space vacant space occupation, and broader urban dynamics and materialities.

flexibility' at the SCIBE (Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment) PhD Conference 'Within the Limits of Scarcity: Rethinking Spaces, City and Practices' 26th–28th February 2013, University of Westminster, London.

Chapter 3

Competing discourses of temporary vacant space reuse

A discursive field

Pop-up spaces have become familiar phenomena in both the art of consumption and the consumption of art. A brief history would have to unravel the splicing together of seemingly incompatible strands of profit and protest, corporate commerce and counter-culture carnival, gnat's attention spans and marathon events.¹

As explored in Chapter 1 the imaginary of temporary vacant space reuse is informed by narratives, arguments, rationales and myths that invoke a range of political positions and agendas. On the surface, the central assumption shared by all proponents of temporary reuse is that it is better to use a vacant space, even if temporarily, than to let it lay empty. Beyond this claim, however, the rationales, modalities and value judgements implicitly or explicitly associated with practices of reuse are often the product of time-space specific alliances, translations and critique. Policies, public debates, written and visual promotional materials, as well as interviews and discussions all belong to this 'field of position-takings' over the meanings of temporary uses in contemporary cities, which pull in many, and sometimes contradictory, discursive directions.² As I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, rather than a coherent narrative, practices and practitioners inhabit, but cannot be reduced to, discursive formations that are constantly negotiated and re-constituted fluidly, as practitioners position themselves in relation to the boundaries constructed by institutions, communities of practice and external observers.

A critical approach to the dynamic production of discourses and positions must therefore draw on a situated analysis of specific spatial and temporal sites of meaning production, from central and local government policies to media representations, to the promotional material of intermediaries and practitioners on the ground. The focus of this chapter will thus be on the dissemination and proliferation of discourses of vacant space reuse in the United Kingdom between 2009 and 2011 and its migration from the marginal to the mainstream. The first half

¹ Downing, H. 2012: Between the Long Roll of Thunder and the Long Fine Flash. A Brief History of a Little Pamphlet Bought from a Pop-up Shop on Redchurch Street in December 2010 on the Shortest Day of the Year. *Dandelion, postgraduate arts journal & research network* 3 (1), pp. 1-3.

² See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the notion of 'field' as employed by Bourdieu, P. 1993: *The field of cultural production: essays on art and literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

of the chapter will begin with a critical overview of the translation of the idea of temporary empty space reuse from a pre-recession 'creative cities' marketing tool into an artistic and community-oriented policy discourse in recessionary Britain. The language and imaginaries that accompany such discourse will be understood to constitute one of the official narratives of temporary reuse and will be analysed as informed by practices and discourses that occur outside institutional discourse, such as in counter-cultural urban practices and spaces. In this section of the chapter I will also discuss the emergence and work of intermediaries tasked with promoting temporary vacant space reuse ideas through participation in the public urban discourse and through ad-hoc projects of reuse, mainly in London. The focus on the specific intermediaries and their visible and hidden connections with participants in the field of meaning-making will enable attending to the rapid transfers of the 'pop-up' fad as a fast-policy response to the effects of the economic recession and as a burgeoning discourse in urban development.³

The second half of the chapter will address the meaning-making practices of projects and practitioners on the ground. Drawing on public forms of address and critique, I will discuss compliance and challenges to mainstream narratives by the 'fringe' art, the socially engaged art scenes, and the squatting communities, and will explore ambiguities and points of frictions. Through an attention to the languages and imaginaries mobilised by practitioners I hope to unravel the 'splicing together of seemingly incompatible strands' mentioned in the opening quotation. As will be shown, the different positions taken by participants in the discursive field of temporary reuse are often fluid and take place in conversation with and borrow arguments from each other, so that rather than with distinct narratives, this chapter is concerned with processes of circulation, translation and ambiguous overlaps at specific points in space and time.

As explained in the previous chapter, the temporary reuse of vacant retail premises constitutes the main focus of this thesis. To discuss the discursive field of reuse, however, in this chapter I will retain a slightly broader angle to attend to the

³ Peck, Theodore and Brenner have used the concept of 'the fast policy complex' to identify processes of rapid development and dissemination of neoliberal urban policies across different actors, public and private bodies, across cities and nation-states. One important characteristic of the fast policy complex is the 'soft disciplining' of best practice through a technocratic replication fantasy of policy models and prefabricated solutions. Peck, J., N. Theodore, and N. Brenner, 2012: Neoliberalism Resurgent? Market Rule after the Great Recession. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111(2), pp. 265-288. See also Peck, J. 2010: *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ways in which the notions of ‘pop-up’ and temporary uses are translated back and forth between the use of vacant buildings and of vacant land, and belong to a wider set of narratives about so-called temporary urbanism.

Pop-up retail: a pre-recessional urban strategy

In Chapter 1 I have introduced critical urban debates that analyse temporary vacant space reuse in the context of creative place marketing and the ‘creative cities’ policy discourses that preceded the financial crisis of 2008/2009. In order to address the discourses specific to post-2009 London, I will build on those debates and briefly trace the origins and dissemination of terms such as ‘pop-up shops’ and ‘temporary urban use’ from the marketing agendas of commercial retailers to urban policymaking. According to various digital magazines and online marketing reports, the appearance of the notion of ‘pop-up’ has to be traced back to the early 2000s. It was used by mainstream media and marketing agents to indicate new and exciting spaces of consumption, particularly in Western global cities such as London and New York. As early as 2004 the global consumer trend firm *Trendwatching* was promoting the term ‘pop-up retail’ to describe limited time-only stores across the world⁴ which were set up to promote particular brands or products, and by 2009 global brands such as Nissan, Prada and Gucci had developed their own global temporary stores.⁵

According to online commentators, the success of commercial ‘pop-ups’ as a form of marketing lay in “surprising consumers with temporary ‘performances’, guaranteeing exclusivity because of the limited time span. It’s about buzz, and about new try-out and testing techniques”.⁶ In promotional materials the term ‘pop-up’ is usually associated with positive notions of vibrancy, dynamism and creativity, and the temporariness of the shops is presented as an urgent reason to visit and

⁴ Trendwatching claims to be “one of the world’s leading trend firms”. For their definition and updates on the ‘Pop-Up Retail’ trend see Trendwatching 2004 (2010): Pop-up Retail. In *Politics & Society*. Trendwatching.com [accessed 13th October 2010].

⁵ Cambie, S. 2010: Pop-ups. Part 1: Creating Micro-Tourism. *Tourism Insights* online, “a service written by tourism professionals that monitors, analyses and interprets trends in the UK tourism market”, <http://www.insights.org.uk>, website archived in April 2010. [15th March 2010]. See also Bradley, L. 2011: Pop Goes the People. Are temporary pop-ups a permanent trend? *Ecosalon* online <http://ecosalon.com/are-temporary-pop-ups-a-permanent-trend/> [accessed 20th May 2011].

⁶ Trendwatching, Pop-up Retail.

experience the space and the products associated with it. As analysed on the online magazine *Tourism Insights*:

Part of the draw of pop-ups is the sense of urgency they create, to get there ‘now’ before it disappears, as well as to have been one of the few who were there to have had the experience [...] Working along similar principles to events, a bit of imaginative thinking can transform an empty space into a vibrant and exciting temporary attraction.⁷

Analysts and promoters of pop-ups writing after the 2009 financial crisis noted that the economic recession in the UK greatly contributed to expanding the popularity of the notion of ‘pop-up shops’ from the commercial to other sectors, whether as a way “to generate income in difficult financial times, low capital outlay, or [as] a local or central government push to fill empty premises”.⁸ In fact, a continuity could be observed with pre-2009 fiscal interventions that encouraged property owners to lease their properties temporarily and reduce high street vacancy through creative activities.⁹ In the mid 2000s in London, for instance, business rates exceptions were already used by cultural and creative industry organisations to negotiate short-term rent-free access to empty spaces, as in the case of the Creative Space Agency (2006-2008), which defined itself as an intermediary linking “owners of vacant property with creative individuals, business and arts organisations looking for potential spaces in London in which to work, exhibit, perform or rehearse”.¹⁰

With the financial crisis, ideas of creative ‘pop-up’ shops and temporary reuse became ever more popular, particularly outside London, where they were deployed by local authorities struggling to counter perceptions of urban vacancy. An

⁷ Cambie, Pop-ups. Part 1.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ In 2008, following the ‘Barker Review of Land Use Planning’, the government brought into force the Rating (Empty Properties) Act 2007 which reformed the business rate relief for empty properties, specifically in urban areas. Prior to the Act, industrial and warehouse premises had received a 100% relief from business rates for as long as they remained empty, and empty commercial properties received a 100% relief from business rates for the first three months of being unoccupied, and a subsequent relief of 50%. In 2008 the permanent exemption from rates for empty industrial property was replaced with a six-month exemption, while the three-month exemption for all other commercial properties was retained, after which full business rates would apply. See ‘Barker Review of Land Use Planning Final Report 2007’ and ‘The Rating (Empty Property) Act 2007’ on www.communities.gov.uk [accessed on 11th March 2011].

¹⁰ The Creative Space Agency was a funded project delivered jointly by CIDA (the Cultural Industries Development Agency) and Urban Space Management, and supported by Arts Council England and Creative London - London Development Agency. From a 2006 Creative Space Agency information pack, which included a manual on short term licences and temporary events: Creative Space Agency 2006. Creative Space Agency Manual: Short Term Licences and Temporary Events. London See also the now archived www.creativespaceagency.co.uk [accessed 10th January 2010].

important precedent for the development of national ‘pop-up shop’ schemes was piloted in 2008 in Camden Town, in the inner London Borough of Camden. Camden Council’s £6 million Pop-Up Scheme was initiated in 2008 as part of Camden Town’s Business Improvement District (BID) and was designed to respond to the local vacancies produced by the recession as well as to “investigate the regeneration and economic development potential of unique and interesting high street interventions”.¹¹ The vision of Camden Town BID was strongly centred on positioning “Camden Town as an international destination for the Creative Industries”¹² and the promotion of high profile art, design and fashion-related events in empty shops followed this strategy of creative regeneration.¹³ The temporary projects showcased in a string of vacant shops included fashion shows by young designers and free marketing drop-in sessions for local businesses.¹⁴ This example of an official public support for temporary uses presents many of the ideas associated with commercial ‘pop-up retail’, such as the stress on place marketing and the creation of ‘temporary attractions’, as well as the distinctively public sector discourse of creative regeneration, where the term creativity refers directly to New Labour’s cultural and creative industries policies. Camden Pop-Up Scheme provided the blueprint for national policymaking on temporary empty shops reuse, as will be discussed in more detail below.¹⁵

¹¹ Camden Town Unlimited 2010: *Pop up shops in Camden Town: A High Street regeneration strategy* <http://www.camdentownunlimited.com/projects/pop-shops> [accessed 23rd February 2012].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ From Camden Council webpage <http://www.camden.gov.uk/ccm/content/business/town-centre-management/pop-up-shop-scheme.en> [accessed 5th November 2010] now archived. The Council’s own declared approach to temporary reuses of vacant retail space was less focused on the arts and more on economic and social benefits for the broader community. The aim of their Pop-Up Scheme was to “make use of empty commercial property in town centres to offer reduced cost space to businesses, artists and community groups to try out new activities or ways of working that offer economic and social benefits to the area”. Pop ups, moreover, were meant to “reduce the visual impact of empty property in town centres; increase footfall and attract new visitors to the borough’s town centres by providing a range of exciting businesses, activities and exhibitions; generate publicity for town centres, offer reduced cost/free space for local entrepreneurs, artists and community groups to try out new ideas and/or reach new audiences; showcase empty property to potential tenants to help it be re-let”. See Camden Council webpage <http://www.camden.gov.uk/ccm/content/business/town-centre-management/pop-up-shop-scheme.en> [accessed 5th November 2010] now archived.

¹⁵ One major difference between the two initiatives was that while Camden Council was able to support the scheme with a budget of £6 million, the DCLG had half that amount to be distributed between 57 local authorities. Source: DCLG 2009: *£3million empty shop revival fund for most deprived and hardest hit high streets*, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1311364> [accessed 10th September 2011] now archived.

Countering recessional perceptions

In April 2009, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) launched a short guide titled *Looking After Our Town Centres*. The foreword, signed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, set out the reason for providing government support to temporary projects in empty spaces:

It is clear that the downturn is giving rise to challenges: the sight of boarded-up shops can be depressing. But turbulent economic times can also herald a period of remarkable innovation, energy and creativity. For example, we are already seeing how some town centre managers are taking swift and positive actions to, for example, fill empty shops and other spaces with art galleries create opportunities for communities to engage in learning, and provide access to local information and services, farmers' markets and community centres.¹⁶

As the recession is euphemistically named 'downturn', boarded-up shops are similarly called 'challenges', not because they are symptomatic of broader and complex socio-economic processes, but because they 'can be depressing', causing negative perception and emotions. Against this scenario, the second sentence counters the negativity of this 'turbulent' economic time and turns it into an opportunity to give rise to 'remarkable innovation, energy and creativity'. In these two sentences lies a central representation of vacant spaces seen simultaneously as a problem and a source of depression, and as an opportunity and a resource. The visible impact of the economic downturn is masked by the performance of the vibrant social interactions associated with a busy retail urban space for the benefit of investors, future tenants and tourists. The idea of pop-up uses thus relies on the temporary activating powers of a form of window dressing where the stress lies in the performance of activation as a 'creative cargo cult' strategy to guard off economic inactivity.¹⁷

The 'swift action' of town planners mentioned in the guide is illustrated by examples of positive fillers that local authorities are putting into place across the

¹⁶ DCLG 2009: *Looking After Our Town Centres*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government.

¹⁷ Jamie Peck uses the term 'creative cargo cult' in his critical analysis of the incongruences of Richard Florida's 'Creative City' policy model, as discussed in the course of Chapter 1. See also Peck, J. 2005: Struggling with the Creative Class. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29, pp. 740-770.

country: from unspecified art galleries, to community learning and information centres and farmers' markets. The text also names the actors who will be responsible for this urban transformation: town centre managers, to whom the guide is addressed, but also businesses, local groups and communities, called 'local partners', who are encouraged to develop 'a clear vision' and to "actively plan to take advantage of new opportunities when the recovery begins".¹⁸ The guidelines identify the role of local groups and communities as playing an active role in these schemes with the future promise of a recovery, as visible in the repetition of key words such as 'local' and 'community'. Responsibility for the success of these policies is displaced on local communities that are expected to become bidders for resources and to manage and staff the empty sites.

Later in 2009, the DCLG announced the award of £3 million to 'reduce the negative impact' of empty shops on 'consumer and business confidence'. The grant was to be subdivided evenly into small grants of around £50,000 each to 57 of the 'hardest hit' councils, based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation and on high vacancy rates.¹⁹ A glance at the map of the spatial distribution of local authorities in receipt of funding [fig. 3.1] shows all major cities in England outside London, with the exception of Leeds, an unsurprisingly high concentration in the North West, the North East and the Midlands, which maps quite neatly the extent and regional differences not just of the crisis of retail but of longer trends in de-industrialisation.²⁰ In London, the only borough in receipt of the fund was Hackney (highlighted in yellow), which used it to launch an 'Art in Empty Spaces' program, as will be discussed in more detail over the course of this chapter.

¹⁸ DCLG 2009: *Looking After Our Town Centres*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government, p. 2.

¹⁹ DCLG 2009: *£3million empty shop revival fund for most deprived and hardest hit high streets*, published 13th August 2009. Site archived, snapshot taken on 8th April 2010 <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1311364> [accessed 10th September 2011].

²⁰ These were: Corby, Nottingham City, Boston, Mansfield, Ashfield, Derby City, Leicester City, Harlow, Great Yarmouth, Ipswich, Hackney, Gateshead, Middlesbrough, Hartlepool, South Tyneside, Darlington, Sunderland, Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, Durham, Rossendale, Salford, Barrow-in-Furness, Blackpool, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Halton, Rochdale, Copeland, Liverpool, Tameside, Pendle, Knowsley, Manchester, Sefton, Bolton, Hyndburn, Preston, Wigan, Thanet, Hastings, Bristol, Stoke-on-Trent, Walsall, Wolverhampton, Coventry, Sandwell.

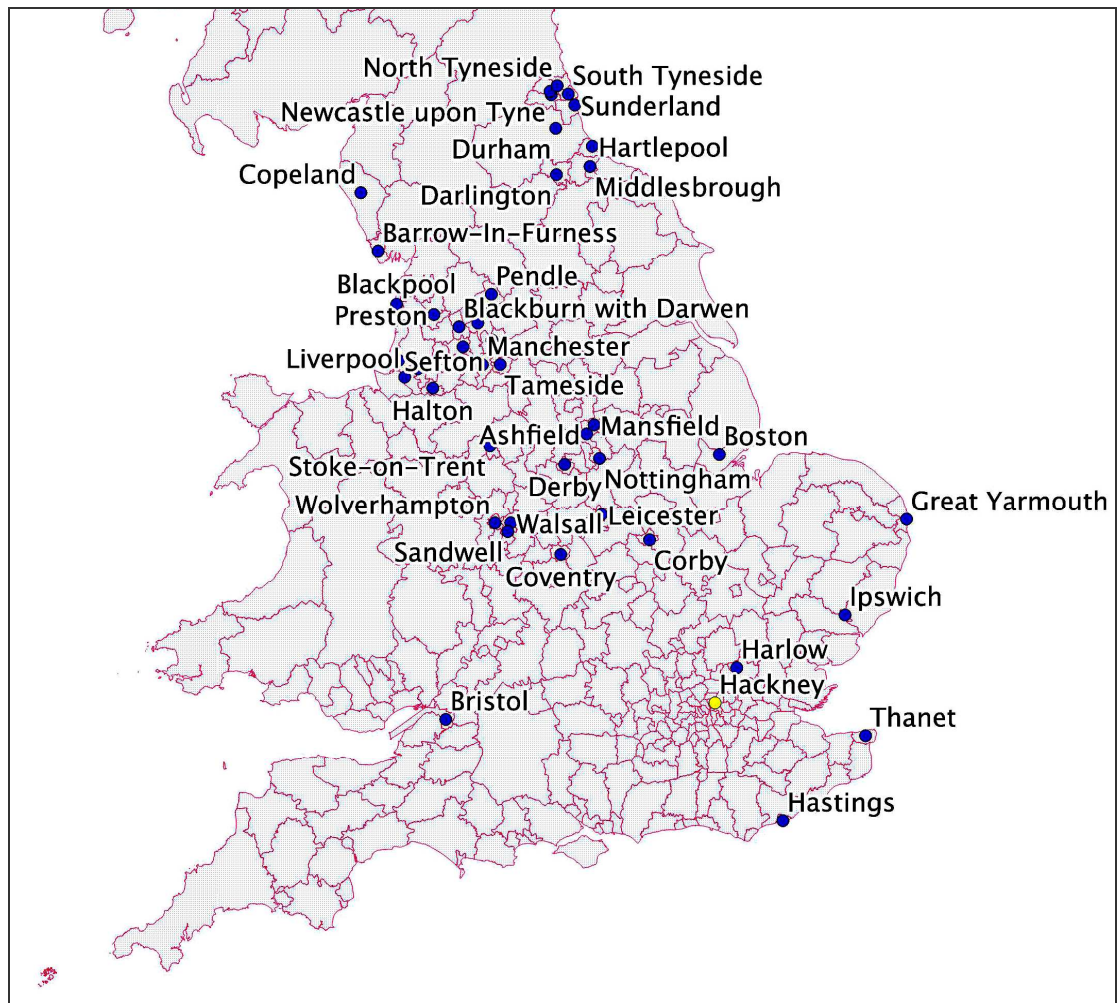


Figure 3.1 Map of local authorities in England in receipt of DCLG Empty Shops grant 2009-2010.
Source: DCLG, £3million empty shop revival fund.

By the end of 2009, many local authorities in London and across the UK had ‘temporary shop uses’ or ‘pop-up uses’ policies and schemes advertised on their websites, and national events began to appear which tried to bring together experiences across the country, such as the *National Empty Shop Conference* on the 19th October 2009. As visible from the flyer [fig. 3.2] the ‘closed’ sign on the front of the leaflet is contrasted with the ‘open’ sign on the back. The reader is encouraged to act by turning the page, thus mirroring the action of opening up and ‘activating’ a vacant shop. The use of visual strategies to narrate temporary use as a moment of positive transformation is common in visual representation of temporary shop reuse, as discussed in further detail in the course of this chapter.



Figure 3.2 Empty Shops: A National Conference A5 flyer, front and back, October 2009. *Source:* personal archive.

The instructions that accompanied the DCLG awards offer grounds for critical interpretations of temporary uses schemes as mainly serving as cosmetic interventions geared towards place marketing and tourism, as the guidelines stated that the funds could be used “to help with cleaning and decorating vacant premises, basic refit for temporary uses, publicity posters, and other activities that can help town centres attract and retain visitors”.²¹ The ephemeral beautification direction of these interventions and its purported positive impact on external visitors have led analysts of tourism to describe these policies as a novel approach to creating micro-tourism.²² Casting aside the broader problems that may produce vacancy, the attention of policy-makers is placed on the production of positive perceptions of empty spaces that, if left vacant, would lead to a decreased consumers’ and investors’ confidence.

The desire to work on perceptions and the emphasis on visual interventions belong to the ambiguous normative vision set out by the DCLG and DCMS’ policy. If the origin of the ‘pop-up’ policy fad could be found in commercial retail and

²¹ DCLG 2009: Looking After Our Town Centres. London: Department for Communities and Local Government, p. 31.

²² Cambie, Pop-ups. Part 1.

marketing, policy-making thus became the site where the narrative of commercial pop-up was translated, for the benefit of urban planners and local communities, into an imaginary of non-commercial ‘creative’ community-oriented activities. Such an imaginary, however, presents many ambiguities, as can be seen in the illustration on the cover of the *Looking After Our Town Centres* booklet, which shows a digital design of a colourful row of four shop windows [fig. 3.3].



Figure 3.3 Source: DCLG/DCMS 2009: *Looking After Our Town Centres*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government (front cover).

The first shop is an unlabelled food store, recognisable from the vertical stripes of the awning; in the second there is a banner saying ‘scouts’, a stand and a boy wearing a neck scarf talking to a passer-by; the third shop sign says ‘art’ and a female passer-by holding a shopping bag is looking at a painting and a modernist-looking abstract sculpture behind the glass window; on the last empty shop the sign says ‘library’ and shows a man browsing through a bookshelf.²³ The image presents an idealised pedestrian high street with low-rise buildings and small shop fronts.

²³ DCLG 2009: *Looking After Our Town Centres*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government.

With regards to the encouraged temporary uses, as identified by the banners, the Scouts embody a rather traditional understanding of community groups and the art on display shows a conservative understanding of what ‘art’ or ‘creative uses’ could entail. The image of the art gallery, moreover, is ambiguous as the art objects inside appear as beautifying fillers behind a closed door. Furthermore, from the policy document it is unclear whether the temporary ‘art gallery’ is to be intended as a community cultural space open to everyone, as in the more radical traditions outlined in Chapter 1, as a private commercial space or as the outreach program of a ‘high art’ cultural institution. An important element of the official narrative of the pop-up discourse is thus the ambiguous characterisation of the two preferred activities to occupy vacant space, ‘art’ and ‘community’, with important implications for the ways in which the schemes were to be implemented on the ground.

Creative fillers

As the national policies for reusing empty spaces were drafted in collaboration with the then Labour Government’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport, cultural activities came to play a central role in the construction of positive examples of short-term reuse and in the official imaginary of temporary and pop-up shops. In the words of the then Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport Ben Bradshaw, “culture and creativity bring life to our town centres. Transforming empty premises into galleries, studios or rehearsal spaces will help restore confidence and regenerate local communities”.²⁴ In July 2009, the connection between vacant space reuse policies and art programming was further strengthened by a match-funding scheme launched in July 2009 by Arts Council England, the *Art in Empty Spaces* Grant for the arts, a £500,000 pot from the National Lottery income meant to help artists and arts organisations “to carry out artistic activities in vacant premises made available to them through the DCLG scheme”.²⁵ The bringing

²⁴ DCLG, *£3million empty shop revival fund for most deprived and hardest hit high streets*, published 13 August 2009. Site archived, snapshot taken on 8th April 2010 <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1311364> [accessed 10th September 2011].

²⁵ Arts Council England 2009: *Art in empty spaces: turning empty spaces into creative spaces*. <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us/investment-in-arts/action-recession/art-empty-spaces/> [accessed 11th January 2010] p.1. To cultural commentators and theorists, the normative dimension of the national and local government’s schemes reveals an important set of implicit conceptual and practical assumptions about the interrelation between ‘art’ practices and ‘community’ projects,

together of ‘culture and creativity’ points to a recurrent and deliberate conflation between cultural practices and the ‘creativity’ promoted by ‘creative city’ models.²⁶ Following Jamie Peck’s understanding of a ‘Floridisation’ of urban cultural policy, the conflation of art and creativity can be seen to exemplify the use of ‘creative city’ ideas as a creativity fix in a time of uncertainty, a creative policy ‘syndrome’ in the words of A.J. Scott.²⁷

The ambiguous normative vision of encouraged pop-up activities became apparent in a national survey of temporary reuse carried out by the Meanwhile Project between 2009 and 2010, and funded as part of the *Looking After our Town Centre* policy.²⁸ The survey revealed that visual arts were prominent in temporary reuse schemes as a result of art projects and exhibitions taking hold of the imagination of local authorities officers. In the words of Mariana, a freelance researcher on the Meanwhile Project:

[I]t was very obvious how many of the projects were just using art! ‘Creative’ directly got translated into ‘art’. [...] There’s [sic] loads of small towns in Britain that are just slowly decaying because the shops are closing. And then, quickly just putting in some art, and not thinking what other things

embedded in recent histories of public funding to the arts in England, and its relation to the discourse and practices of urban regeneration, as will be explored in the second half of this chapter.

²⁶ A similar deliberate confusion has been critically noted by sociologist Angela McRobbie with regards to the official definition of ‘cultural industries’ offered by the Department for Media, Culture and Sport and NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) in the UK. McRobbie, A. 2002: ‘Everyone is creative’. Artists as pioneers of the New Economy? In *Be Creative!* www.k3000.ch/becreative/texts/text_5.html [accessed 8th May 2010].

²⁷ Scott, A. J. 2006: Creative cities: Conceptual issues and policy questions. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 28(1), pp. 1-17. See also Peck, J. 2005: Struggling with the creative class. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Affairs* 29 (4), pp. 740–770, and Peck, J. 2011: Creative Moments: Working Culture, through Municipal Socialism and Neoliberal Urbanism, in McCann, E., and K. Ward (eds) *Mobile urbanism: cities and policymaking in the global age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Informal conversations with regeneration officers in local authorities officers challenged the bona fide of those who promote this discourse at the level of public institutions and perceived the government’s support of temporary empty space reuse as a frantic attempt, already tinted by nostalgia, to cling on the myths of New Labour entrepreneurialism and ‘creative industries’ fix, in the context of financial and social collapse. Conversation with N., 13th September 2011.

²⁸ The Meanwhile Project was set up with the tripartite aim of researching existing projects of vacant spaces reuse across the UK, discovering and providing practical solutions to legal and financial barriers, such as developing legally recognised forms of ‘meanwhile’ leases, and showcasing successful meanwhile shops. The first stage of the Meanwhile project was to research what was already happening in different places across England. In the words of one of the founders of Meanwhile Space CIC: “Our brief was, if people are using empty space around the country, what are they getting out of that space? And are they creating good outcomes, basically, not in a government’s sense, but it’s good stuff happening from that, and if good stuff is happening, what are those good things? And why isn’t it happening more?” Interview 1st July 2011. See also Meanwhile Project 2010: *No Time to Waste... The Meanwhile Use of Assets for Community Benefit*. London: Meanwhile Space CIC.

could we try.. That's the safest option, almost...and for the councils as well, it's the safest thing: 'let's just put up a nice picture in the window'.²⁹

Calling art exhibitions 'the safest thing', Mariana was drawing attention to the ease with which art exhibitions can be rapidly installed and uninstalled in a vacant site, as well as to the alleged predictability of the social impact of 'putting a nice picture in the window' as compared to more participatory and community-oriented activities. Figure 3.4, sourced from a 2010 proposal to reuse vacant shop fronts for artistic activities in Newham, London, contrasts the greyness of an empty street with the colourful and cheerful desire for artistic reuse.



Figure 3.4 Screenshot from Wasted Spaces' Rathbone Market project, Canning Town [wastedspaces.org accessed 12th January 2011].

Meanwhile uses and place activation

Besides researching and surveying existing practices of reuse, another aim of the Meanwhile Project was to act as an intermediary and to promote temporary uses. In doing so, between 2009 and 2010, and subsequently in its incarnation as the Community Interest Company Meanwhile Space, the organisation became an important player in the dissemination and framing of ideas of temporary vacant space reuse in London. Its promotional material succinctly frames the company's approach to and rationale for promoting temporary 'meanwhile' empty space reuse,

²⁹ Conversation with Mariana, 9th August 2011.

as stated on one of their promotional materials [fig. 3.5]: “Empty spaces are a blight to communities, a financial drain to owners and stimulate wider civic problems. To us they are an opportunity.”



Figure 3.5 Meanwhile Space CIC promotional postcard 2011(front and back). *Source:* personal archive.

The image on the front of the promotional postcard above presents a schematic drawing of string of high street shops with empty or painted over windows, while the text on the back reproduces the official dual narrative of empty spaces as a wasted resource and as an opportunity, and positions the company as an expert vehicle through which the problem of vacancy can be solved. It is important to highlight that the representation of empty spaces as spaces of opportunities relies

on an understanding of vacancy as a spatial and temporal exception within a dynamic of continuous urban development.

This vision is central to the regeneration industry, from which many individuals involved in Meanwhile Space come from. In the self-representation of Meanwhile Space founders, in fact, the idea of ‘meanwhile use’ is not explicitly related to the ‘pop-up retail’ genealogy identified at the beginning of this chapter, but to large-scale urban regeneration projects, and to the temporary uses that could take place during the period of brown-field land and property acquisition:

[I]f this table [drawing on the table with his hands] was the ultimate development site, right, they might have bought this corner here, at which point, as soon as they’ve purchased it, it would be run down, but then it might take an unknown period to acquire the rest, so we were looking at, ‘oh, hang on, there is a bit of an opportunity here to use that space!’ So we thought that there was room to explore, as a resource that we could provide for people, accessing these spaces for determined periods of time, and that’s when we created ‘meanwhile space’.³⁰

In this explanation, the opportunity to use the land or the property is temporary because the long-term temporal horizon is determined by the redevelopment plan of the regeneration scheme in place. For local authorities engaged in projects of urban regeneration, interim uses of land and property during long-term site assemblages is standard practice, and to regeneration officials the ‘meanwhile’ idea appeared simply as a clever rebranding of already existing practices of spatial management:

‘Meanwhile’ is, as far as I understand it, it’s like a rebranding of... it just means temporary, isn’t it? [...] It’s become fashionable... it makes it seem like the new thing that we are all doing, whereas people have been doing lots of interesting temporary things for a long time, and maybe for various reasons this idea has resurgence, and somebody clever came up with a new word for it.³¹

The ‘new word’ that Meanwhile Project have been tasked with propagating and disseminating is an important variance of the idea of temporary uses in which the temporariness of the space is pre-determined by a longer-term plan for urban

³⁰ Interview with founders of the Meanwhile Space CIC, 1st July 2011.

³¹ Interview with Fred, 27th September 2011. Fred was a Newham Council officer involved in the organisation of the *Meanwhile London Competition*, as explained later in this chapter.

regeneration or redevelopment. The idea of a temporary window of opportunity is clear in the Meanwhile Project statement of intent:

As a philosophy Meanwhile is based on the belief that empty properties spoil town centres, destroy economic and social value, and waste resources that we cannot afford to leave idle. Vibrant interim uses led by local communities will benefit existing shops, as well as the wider town centre, through increased footfall, bringing life back to the high street [...] Generating creativity and enterprise from empty spaces and places, the Meanwhile Project works with landlords, agents, potential occupiers and local authorities to enable uses that benefit the community while something else is waiting to happen.³²

The ‘something else waiting to happen’ clearly refers to the redevelopment of a site or the return of profit-making businesses capable to afford full rents and rates. Applied to vacant shops in recessionary high streets, the ‘meanwhile’ idea seems akin to the role played by practices of temporary shop reuse observed by Sharon Zukin in early 1990s recessionary New York, which performed a take over of productive economies by the symbolic economy to “produce and promote imaginative reconstructions of the city” and to ‘sell’ urban growth.³³

The symbolic economy of ‘meanwhile uses’ is evident in the use of visual representations of vacant spaces ‘before’, ‘during’ and ‘after’: a clear visual trope of place activation, as visible in the collection of photographs of the vacant sites posted on the Meanwhile Project’s online forum and as part of their public and open access reports. Figure 3.6 belongs to the visual promotion of Meanwhile Space available through their online platforms. Their intended audience is heterogeneous, comprising of members of the Ning forum, prospective users of the various Meanwhile sites, local authorities and private property owners. Its title ‘Before, During & After photos’ and composition convey a narrative that contrasts the depopulated messiness of the closed shop with the visual busyness of its occupation.

³² Meanwhile Project website, <http://www.meanwhile.org.uk/about-us> [accessed 12th February 2010].

³³ Sharon Zukin analysed the practice of renting vacant retail space for art installations in New York during the recession 1991-1993, describing it as “an even more surreal example of culture framing space to project an image of urban growth”. Zukin, S. 1995: *The cultures of cities*. Cambridge: Blackwell, pp. 15-17.

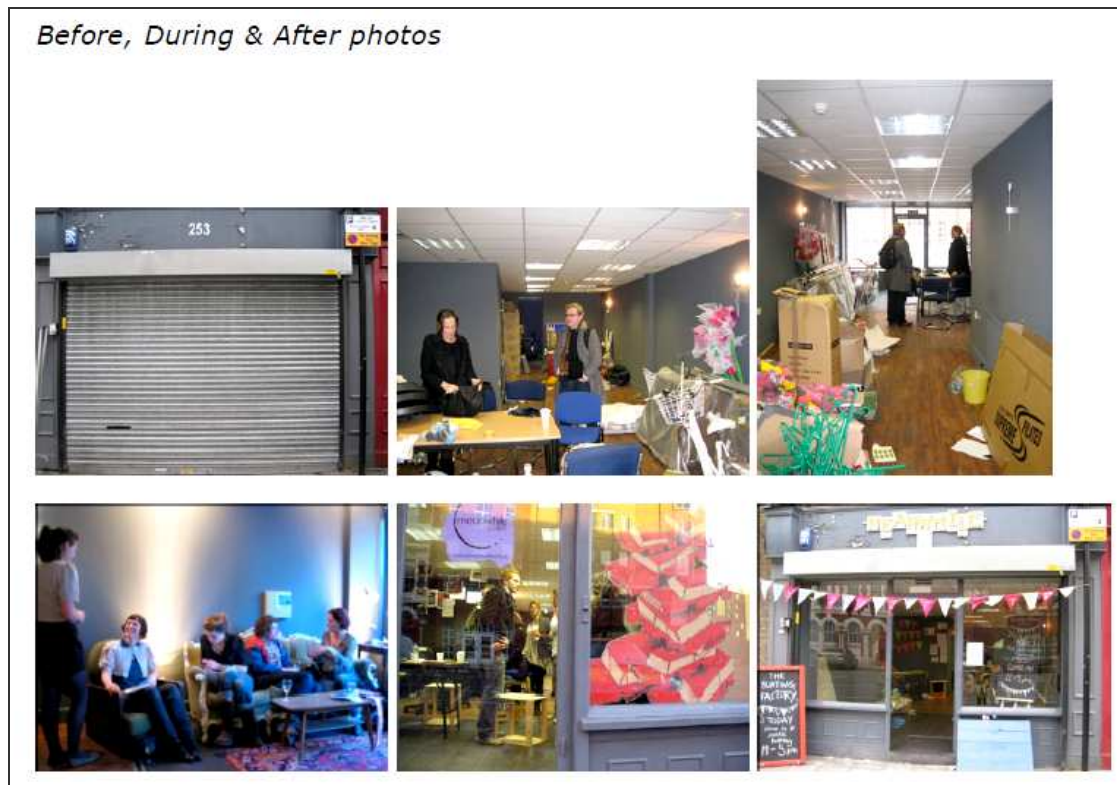


Figure 3.6 'Before, During & After photos'. *Source: Meanwhile Space 2010: Meanwhile Hoxton Centre Evaluation, p. 1.*

The bottom three images of the interior show young people leisurely chatting on a sofa and the colourful exterior of the shop front under 'meanwhile' use. It is important to note the colourful bunting, the open door and an A-board in the street announcing activities in the space. As will be shown in the course of this and the following chapters, these props belong to a grammar of 'temporary use' aesthetics, used to promote positive imaginaries of sociability and openness across a range of different temporary shop occupations.

A similar visual narrative was used by the Space Makers Agency, another London-based temporary use intermediary closely connected to Meanwhile Space, as for example in the Agency's online documentation and promotion of its activities in a vacant arcade in Brixton Market, Lambeth, later rebranded 'Brixton village'.³⁴

³⁴ The case of the Granville Arcade within Brixton Market, in the south London borough of Lambeth, is emblematic. The market comprises a street market and a series of early 20th Century covered shopping arcades. In 2009, a group of artists and social entrepreneurs called Space Makers Agency were tasked with revitalising one of them, the Granville Arcade, which presented many vacancies and was deemed to be declining. The project was initially meant to take place across twenty vacant shops for three months, but the 'creative' uses it generated were so successful in attracting visitors and shoppers that the arcade's managers decided to continue it for a year, from November 2009 till November 2010. The place was rebranded 'Brixton Village' and hosted performances, pop-up galleries, designers' and delicatessen temporary shops, many of which had been leased rent-free on a

In the ‘before’ and ‘after’ image [fig. 3.7], the black and white is used to convey a sense of dereliction and abandonment, increased by a lone figure in the background walking away from the viewer. This is directly contrasted by the visual cacophony of the same site filled with colourful shop fronts, bunting and a smiling crowd, evoking an imaginary of fervid activity. Through images of informal sociability, such as those above, intermediaries evidence the ways in which meanwhile uses ‘activate’ previously wasted spaces.³⁵



Figure 3.7 ‘Before. After’. *Source:* screenshot taken in 2010 from Space Makers Agency’s Brixton Market webpage <http://spacemakers.info/brixton> [now archived].

By analysing these visual representations, it can be argued that the narrative of place activation is informed by an idea of ‘vibrancy’ associated with an understanding of creativity as artisanal, localised, relational and small-scale; this is a specific creative city aesthetic that urban cultural theorist Christopher Lindner has called ‘slow art’.³⁶ Vacant spaces are wasted, and the ‘meanwhile’ uses that transform them into resources once again, bringing ‘life’ back to allegedly lifeless streets and shopping parades, belong to a specific form of visual and spatial

temporary basis.

³⁵ These remarkably similar visual markers seem to reproduce Sharon Zukin’s definition of ‘authentic’ spaces as those where residents with high cultural capital can consume re-imagined creative representations of marginal neighbourhoods as genuine oases in a world dominated by mass-produced goods. Zukin, S. 2008: Consuming authenticity. *Cultural Studies* 22(5), pp. 724-748.

³⁶ Lindner, C and Meissner, M. (forthcoming) Slow Art and the Creative City: Amsterdam, Street Photography, and Urban Renewal, *Space and Culture*.

appropriation, the performance of which will be explored and discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Urban connectivity and the role of intermediaries

The market creates the framework: but it is people who act within it. The endless adaptation of production to consumption, of supply to demand, is not achieved automatically. Resources do not allocate themselves: they have to be organised by people, above all the entrepreneur.³⁷

A further implication of the narrative of place activation is that it clearly identifies certain groups as invested with the power to return ‘vibrancy’ to urban spaces that allegedly lack it. It points in the direction of a range of collectives, agencies and organisations acting as intermediaries between visitors, users, property owners and local authorities. The already mentioned Meanwhile Space, the Empty Space Network, Space Makers Agency and Wasted Spaces, among many others, have occupied this position of trusted middle persons.³⁸ Some of these intermediaries and agencies have self-identified as ‘meanwhilers’ and ‘pop-up people’, trying to coin neologisms that could encompass their activities within the field of temporary urban reuse. The *Pop Up People* report published in February 2012 by the Empty Shop Network, for example, offers a depiction of the personal and professional characteristics required to become a pop-up shop practitioner [fig. 3.8], and begins with the line “Pop Up People: are truly entrepreneurial, even if their project is more about community than commerce”.³⁹

The narrative promoted by temporary uses intermediaries about their own role in the field of short-term urban uses is centred on the idea of connecting two resources: the ‘wasted’ empty spaces, on one hand, and the creative practitioners lacking spaces to experiment and work, on the other. This connectionist narrative⁴⁰ is clearly exemplified by the words of a Meanwhile Space founder: “we know there are

³⁷ Charles Leadbeater writing in the *New Statesman* in 1999, cited in Armstrong, P. 2005: *Critique of entrepreneurship: people and policy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 39-40.

³⁸ Interview with Meanwhile Space CIC founders, 1st July 2011.

³⁹ Thompson, D. 2012: *Pop Up People: We Can Do So Much More Together*. Accessed from the Empty Shop Network’s website www.howtopopup.co.uk [accessed 15th June 2012].

⁴⁰ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello use the adjective ‘connexionist’ to discuss the workings of networks in their analysis of the projective city, as will be explored in more detail in the following chapter. Boltanski, L., and E. Chiapello 2005: *The new spirit of capitalism*. London: Verso, p. 104.

spaces out there, we certainly know there are projects that are looking for space, and we want to connect them”.⁴¹

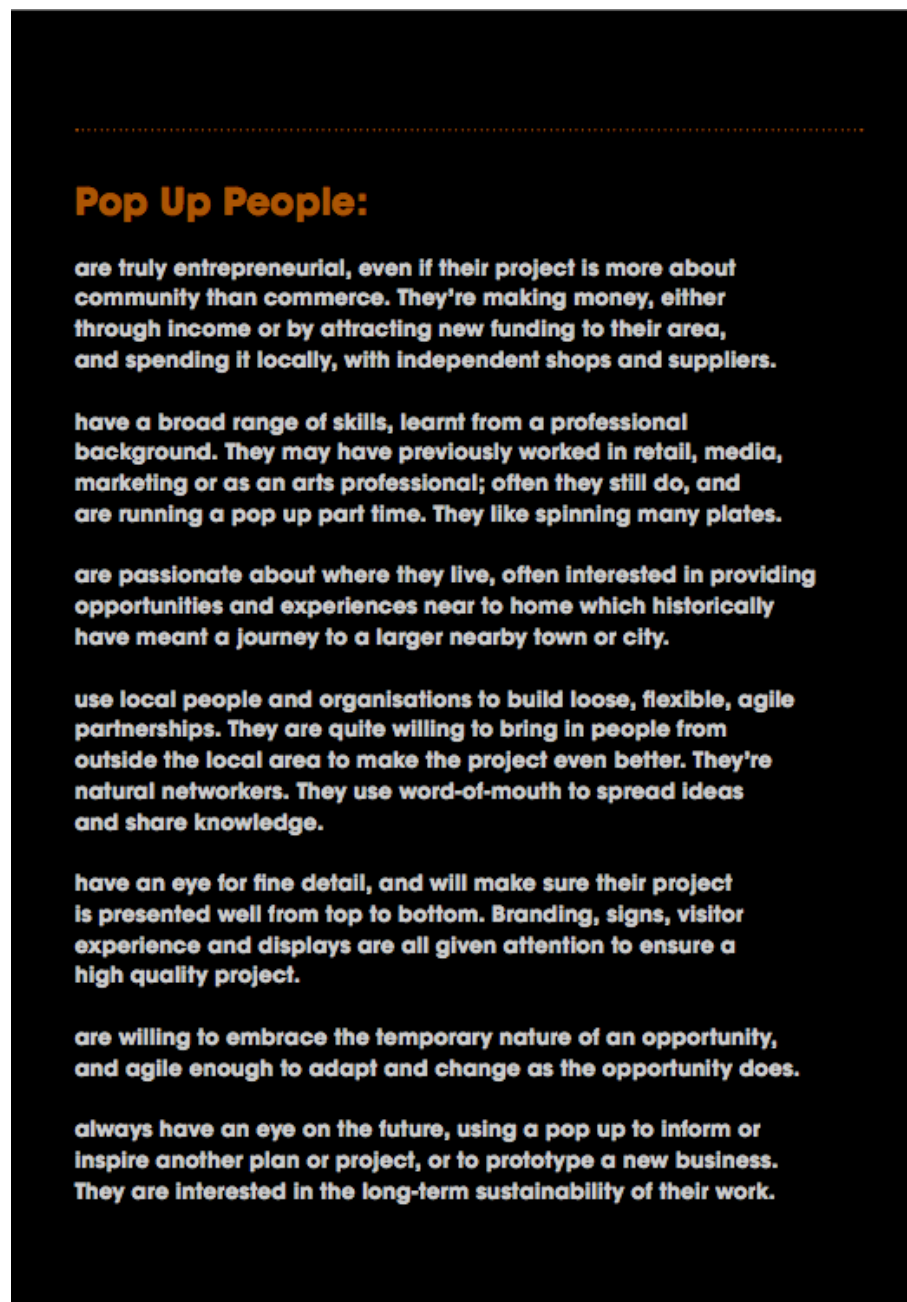


Figure 3.8 Screenshot of D. Thompson's *Pop Up People* report, p. 5.

In this narrative, intermediaries act as social entrepreneurs connecting a network of cultural and social practitioners, available for short-term projects, and a fluid network of empty spaces awaiting occupation.⁴² While this narrative presents a

⁴¹ Interview with Meanwhile Space CIC founders, 1st July 2011.

⁴² As discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to Richard Lloyd's analysis of place-based networking and creative work in Chicago in Lloyd, R. D. 2006: *Neo-Bohemia: art and commerce in the postindustrial*

situation of total flexibility and availability of people, time and resources, the materialities of connecting people and spaces reveal social and economic scenarios more complex than this alleged smooth connectivity purports, as will be critically explored in the following Chapter 4.

The role of intermediaries also involves acting as discursive intermediaries between the official policy discourse and its implementation on the ground, translating the government's discourse into existing networks and local practices, enrolling willing practitioners and property owners and developers. To do so, an important part of their activities has been to set up, maintain and promote the discursive and imaginary framework through public events, workshops and talks. While the founders of Meanwhile Space conceded that 'meanwhile use' is not an original concept, they underlined their extensive work to make the term, and temporary reuse, more acceptable, and to create "a more normalised version for dealing with temporary space".⁴³ Meanwhile use has now "started to become an accepted standard phrase [entering] the lexicon of the property world" thanks to over 30 events in the nine months between June 2009 and March 2010, including public presentations and talks, participation in public round table discussions and workshops, and collaborations with other intermediaries, public and private organisations and institutions.⁴⁴

During the summer of 2010, for instance, Meanwhile Project organised a roundtable discussion titled 'Site Life Debate' in association with *Property Week*, a UK-based magazine for national and international property news, which had ran a temporary uses competition and had been active promoting interim uses on stalled development sites, through their Site Life campaign.⁴⁵ The aim of the campaign was "to breathe life back into stalled development sites and empty buildings [...] through temporary uses from allotments to art fairs until development can start".⁴⁶ The 'Site Life Debate' roundtable took place in Stratford Town Hall in the London Borough of

city. New York: Routledge, and to Adam Arvidssone's place-based marketing in Denmark, in Arvidsson, A. 2007: Creative Class or Administrative Class? On Advertising and the 'Underground'. *Ephemera* 7(1), pp. 8-23.

⁴³ Interview with founders of Meanwhile Space CIC, 1st July 2011.

⁴⁴ Ibid. See also the report *No Time to Waste... The Meanwhile Use of Assets for Community Benefit*, 2010. London: Meanwhile Space, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Rigby, J. 2010: Join our campaign to bring the UK's empty sites back to life. *Property Week*. In July 2010 a report of the 'Site Life Debate' was published online on the Meanwhile Project website <http://www.meanwhile.org.uk/news/property-week-roundtable> [14th accessed September 2011].

⁴⁶ As reported in Baker, K. 2011: Harrow Council opens fake shop to attract retailers. *Property Week* online magazine.

Newham.⁴⁷ The location is significant as a few months later Newham Council launched the ‘Meanwhile London Competition’ to seek proposals for temporary projects in three vacant development sites in the Royal Docks. According to Fred, an officer of the Newham Regeneration team, the competition was the direct result of a conversation between a senior officer in Regeneration and the editor of *Property Week* on the possibility of “animating in the short term” empty land in public ownership.⁴⁸

For Newham Council, the notion of ‘meanwhile use’ became a marketing vehicle to push for a locally specific agenda of rebranding and real estate development, which received public backing from the Mayor of London and was directly influenced by City Hall through a partnership between Newham Council and Design for London, since one of the ‘meanwhile’ sites was owned by the London Development Agency. As explained by Fred, one of the priorities of the Council in recent years had been to raise its media profile, as for example by rebranding itself as ‘Newham London’:

The Council wanted to start making sure people knew Newham was London, not some... place... miles away, that this is real London, the Olympics are happening here. This is London. And for the people from the outside that you are trying to attract, the Japanese or Chinese, or Russian investors, as might be for some of these big development sites... that’s quite important.⁴⁹

In this context, calling a temporary reuse competition ‘Meanwhile London’ meant to market the Royal Docks as belonging to London as a global centre of real estate investment and of urban innovation, and the disappearance of Newham in the name of the competition clearly indicated this intention:

[I]t’s just... marketing, isn’t it? It’s a way of saying... this is really important on a London-wide scale [...] It’s about trying to make the case that what

⁴⁷ Among the members on the panel was the editor of *Property Week*, the director of Public Space, a government’s advisor within the Commission for the Built Environment (now decommissioned), the chief executive of the British Property Federation (a campaign group lobbying on behalf of the commercial property industry), a member of the Department for Communities and Local Government, the development manager for Land Securities’ London Portfolio, various representatives of real estate companies and law firms, and the Director of Innovation at the Development Trusts Association which was running the Meanwhile Project in partnership with Meanwhile Space CIC. One of the issues debated is ‘incremental upgrading’, the need for incremental developments rather than all-in-one go developments, which have stalled because of the recession. Crucial to this is low liability leases for tenants, so they can be moved on rapidly and therefore the introduction of a legally recognised ‘meanwhile lease’.

⁴⁸ Interview with Fred, Newham Council officer, 27th September 2011.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

we're doing in Newham [...] is not just some little thing going on, this is really important. [...] Meanwhile Royal Docks, or Meanwhile Newham maybe isn't quite as attractive as Meanwhile London.⁵⁰

Initially the title raised some resistance within council officers outside the Regeneration team, who felt that there was no need to use the term 'meanwhile' if what was intended was a 'temporary use'. In response to this, Fred thought it important to push the remit of the concept beyond the idea of temporarily using shop units, with which it is usually associated:

I don't see any reason why we shouldn't have used [the term] meanwhile for our competition. It's no more applicable to shop units than to development sites [...] The competition was on a different scale to a lot of the temporary use stuff, it wasn't about paying a few artists to make a shop unit look nice, as important as those things can be, it was... a big, high profile site, in London's most important regeneration area next to an Olympic venue.⁵¹

This remark clearly shows how art projects in vacant shops are a crucial reference in the circulating imaginaries of temporary vacant space reuse, and how notions such as 'interim' and 'meanwhile' reuse were deployed by *Property Week* and the 'Meanwhile London Competition' to expand the idea of temporary uses to development sites. For Newham Council, the audience of the context was constituted by not simply investors, but also by other town managers and urban professionals. They wanted their competition "to go viral and to be adopted elsewhere and for other people to come to us, and ask us how we did it and what we did, and what the issues were. [...] We wanted it to be something which would... catch up",⁵² among other local authorities and urban professionals.

Temporary urbanism: enrolling urban professionals

The example of the connection between *Property Week*'s 'Site Life' campaign, Meanwhile Space and the 'Meanwhile London Competition' shows the permeability and the translation of policy discourse and ideas between the public and

⁵⁰ Interview with Fred, Newham Council officer, 27th September 2011.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

the private sectors, from ‘creative’ regeneration to forms of place marketing [see figure 3.9].

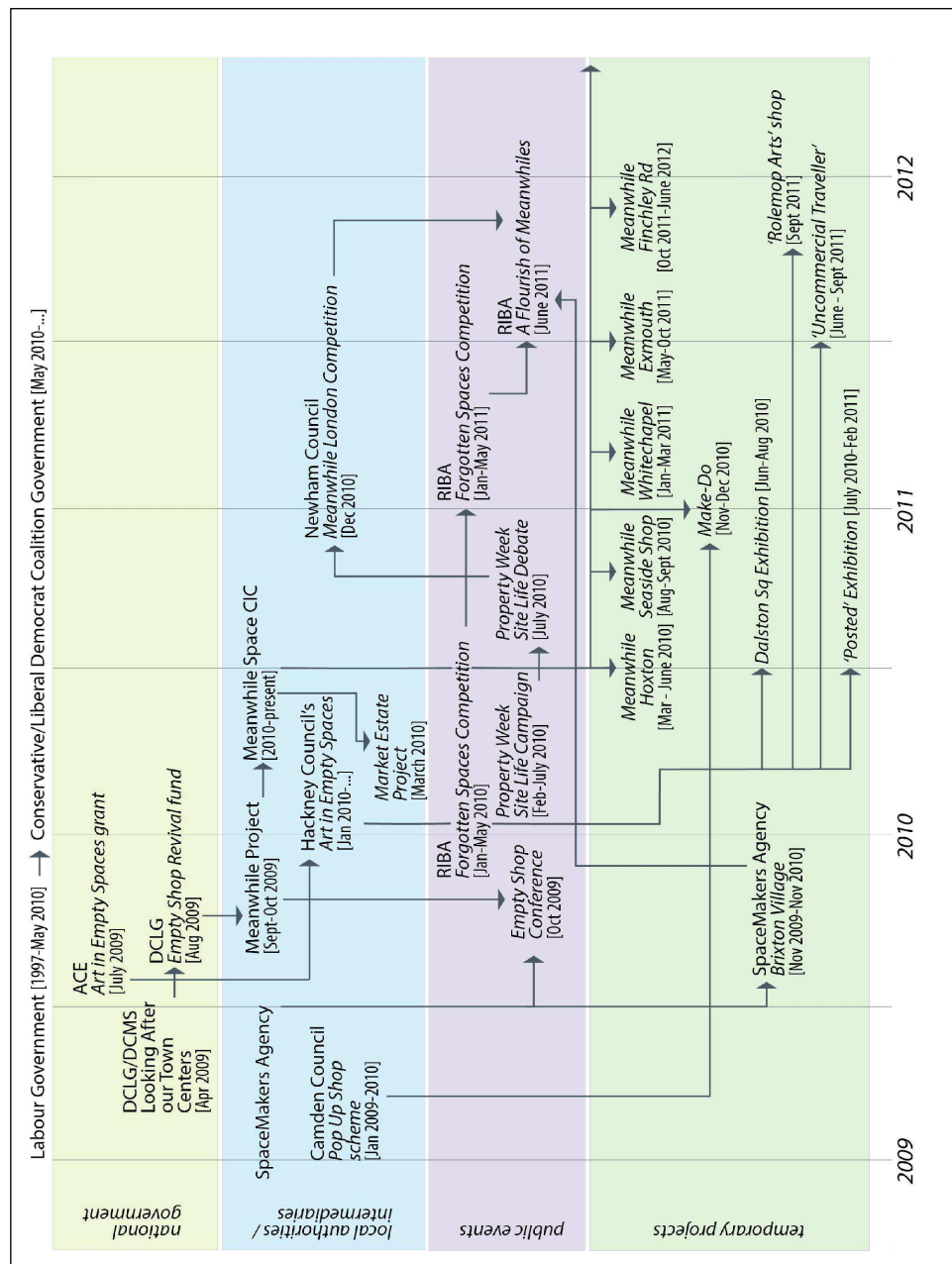


Figure 3.9 Timeline of policy mobility between national and local government, intermediaries, public and private sector organisations and projects of temporary shop reuse.

The promotion of temporary uses by the Meanwhile London Competition and Design for London was also important to translate the idea of pop-up from the artistic field to the fields of architecture and urban planning. The official position of architects and urban planners in the discourse of temporary urban reuse seemed committed to extending meanwhile mainstream narratives to the reuse of vacant

sites, as visible in a public talk organised at the main site of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in June 2011 and titled ‘A Flourish of Meanwhiles’.⁵³

While the press release questioned the proliferation of temporary reuse and its relation to urban regeneration, in her opening remarks, the chair (Lucy Musgrave from planning consultancy *Publica*) described London as a city in flux and urged urban practitioners to embrace change, and to integrate the proliferation of terms such as pop-up, interim, temporary and meanwhile into planning strategy. Many of the speakers and the chair were actively promoting temporary uses in a plea to private developers and investors, mentioning figures such as the “43 million lost revenue for dilapidated and underused spaces in Central London”⁵⁴ and explaining in great detail how temporary uses could mitigate the risks of rejection of planning applications by allowing private developers to try out and test aspects of their place-making strategies.

Besides appealing to private developers and investors, the event was really about translating the official narrative into a script for urban professionals. The presentation of the *NESTA 2011 Compendium of the Civic Economy* report at the same event, for example, illustrated and celebrated the ability of ‘civic entrepreneurs’ to draw on existing local resources, both in the form of participants and volunteers and in the form of monetary and in-kind support, for running short-term spaces.⁵⁵ The definition of civic economy offered by the report centred on the idea of “unlocking dormant assets” through “collaboratively ‘mapping’ the assets of places (both physical spaces and hidden talents and learning dreams)”.⁵⁶ The idea of dormant social and physical assets needing to be unlocked or activated by urban professionals was also central to the presentation by Klaus Overmeyer, author of *Urban Pioneers. Temporary Use and Urban Development in Berlin* (2007) and the person allegedly referred to by employees of the London Development Agency as ‘the pop-up guru’.⁵⁷

⁵³ The talk took place on the 28th June 2011 at RIBA’s main venue on Great Portland Street. Source: RIBA 2011: ‘A Flourish of Meanwhiles’ Press Release (online). The list of speakers included: Matthew Lloyd of Matthew Lloyd Architects, Dougald Hine from Space Makers Agency, Klaus Overmeyer from Studio UC Klaus Overmeyer, Michelle Provoost from Crimson Architectural Historians and Tobias Goevert from Design for London.

⁵⁴ Diary entry from the ‘A Flourish of Meanwhiles’ event.

⁵⁵ NESTA, CABE and 00:/ 2011: *NESTA 2011 Compendium for the Civic Economy*, p. 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁵⁷ Personal communication with a former employee of the London Development Agency, July 2011.

The audience of the talk was interestingly composed mainly of people in their twenties and thirties, dressed ‘smart casual’, who during the questions from the floor identified themselves as young professionals in the fields of architecture and urban design. The event seemed thus to offer and re-enact a series of arguments that those junior workers in the fields of architecture and design could re-use at a later stage in their promotion and rationale for temporary projects. This was consistent with RIBA’s previous role in promoting temporary uses through a design competition titled *Forgotten Spaces* (2010 and 2011), run in collaboration with Design for London and aimed at architects and social entrepreneurs asked “to nominate a forgotten space in Greater London and conceive an imaginative and inspiring proposal for its regeneration”.⁵⁸ In this context the event can be seen as playing an important role in setting a script and a set of tasks for young urban entrepreneurs, who are to map ‘forgotten spaces’, use their skills to extract existing knowledges about places and draw on their social and professional networks to create short-term spatial interventions.

The event was also important politically to re-position discourses of temporary uses in light of urban and social policies promoted by the Conservative-Liberal Democrats Coalition Government (2010 – present), which involved a combination of drastic reduction of government spending and a promotion of voluntarism and civic enterprise under the slogan ‘Big Society, Small Government’.⁵⁹ The ambiguity of this combination has been defined by David Featherstone et al. as ‘austerity localism’.⁶⁰ It was unsurprising therefore that NESTA’s *Compendium* to promote the “new civic start-up domain” was prefaced by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron. Likewise, when architect Tobias Goevert from Design for London explained how the ‘activation of community spaces’ informed projects such as the Meanwhile London Competition and smaller-scale pilots as the Dalston Curve Garden, a pop-up garden in Hackney, he referred to a media headline that heralded them as the true incarnation of the ‘Big Society’.⁶¹ A

⁵⁸ See www.architecture.com/forgottenspaceslondon [accessed 12th September 2012].

⁵⁹ As noted by political commentators, the Coalition government was technically not voted in by the electorate, as it was formed only after the general election through complex negotiations between the two parties. The notion of ‘Big Society’ belonged to the Conservative’s electoral campaign, see Conservative Party, 2010: *The Conservative Manifesto 2010*.

⁶⁰ Featherstone, D., Ince, A., Mackinnon, D., Strauss, K. and Cumbers, A. 2012: Progressive localism and the construction of political alternatives. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37, pp. 177–182.

⁶¹ Tobias Goevert from Design for London referenced the article ‘The big society begins in Dalston’

curiously lone voice in such a celebration of the alignment between social enterprise and the coalition government's agendas was Space Makers Agency's Dougald Hine, who talked about the already mentioned 'Brixton Village' project and introduced the network as a coming together of "squatters and people from think tanks" interested in "improvisational DIY ways to deal with empty spaces"⁶².

The mention of squatting seemed to be unflinchingly accepted by the members of the audience as one of the many legitimate traditions informing the idea of DiY practices of empty space reuse. The obvious inherent contradiction between, on one hand, encouraging developers and investors to understand temporary uses as a strategy aligned to their own agendas, and mentioning unlawful political occupations as a source of inspiration, was raised neither by the speakers nor by members of the audience. Moreover, the Space Makers Agency had run workshops as part of RIBA's *Forgotten Spaces* competition 2010, so it could be said that their reference to unlawful empty spaces occupations was already understood as inscribed within institutional narratives of legitimate forms of reuse.⁶³ The 'A Flourish of Meanwhiles' event can thus be seen to encompass and promote, in a nutshell, the range of narratives that constitute the official discourse of temporary urban reuse: creativity, entrepreneurialism, community orientation, the stress on activation and the fundamental alignment of practices of reuse with urban regeneration and redevelopment aims. It also briefly pointed in the direction of countercultural practices of reuse, a strikingly tangential narrative that will be explored in more detail below.

Having outlined the official field of position-takings, it is now important to address how such policy-making and officially sanctioned discourses are experienced, translated and contested by those practitioners and professionals who

appeared in the London paper *Evening Standard* on 30th June 2010.

⁶² Verbatim notes from Dougald Hine's presentation at the 'A Flourish of Meanwhiles' event.

⁶³ See [http://ribaforgotten.spacemakers.org.uk/Forgotten Spaces 2010](http://ribaforgotten.spacemakers.org.uk/ForgottenSpaces2010) [accessed 27th January 2011]. The official discourse of temporary reuse is however careful to establish the legal basis for temporary reuse. In translating the official government discourse to landlords and practitioners on the ground, Meanwhile Space had to take care to distance their promotion of temporary reuse from squatting, and to reconfirm private property as an inalienable right of the individual against forms of collective re-appropriation, which informs the legal construction of the lease produced as part of the Meanwhile Project. Interview with J. and E., July 1st 2011, London. A key feature of the Meanwhile lease is in fact the exemption from the 1954 Landlord and Tenant Act that regulates security of tenure and the rights of tenants around the renewal of a tenancy agreement. In the words of a Meanwhile Project employee "it basically means that if you use this space you are not acquiring any rights over it". See *1954. Landlord and Tenant Act 1954 London* and DCLG 2010: Meanwhile use lease and guidance notes. London: Department for Communities and Local Government, p. 4.

are designated to undertake temporary reuse projects. The following section will question a smooth translation between official and unofficial discourses and practices, and question the ways in which practitioners position themselves in relationship to the different narratives outlined so far. The second half of this chapter will therefore explore a range of sites and positions through which practitioners and activists on the ground produce and contest mainstream ideas of temporary reuse. It will begin by addressing the position of pop-up art spaces at the fringe of the mainstream art market, and their critique, and then continue to discuss the position of community-oriented practitioners and their refusal of the ideas associated with ‘pop-up shops’. Finally I will analyse the ambiguous practical and discursive overlaps between official narratives and artistic squats, and outline elements of a more radical critique articulated through political squatted shop fronts.

Translations on the ground: pop-up art spaces

For a long time ‘pop-up’ spaces have featured prominently in the discourses and imaginaries of urban cultural practitioners and activists, as outlined in Chapter 1. Using shop fronts for art exhibitions and projects has become increasingly popular among young creative practitioners, performers and visual artists, especially in the last decade. As commented by Werner, a London-based visual artist in his mid twenties: “it’s hard to say when was the first spark... it seems everyone is doing [pop-ups] now. Access must have got easier”.⁶⁴ The perception of increased accessibility partially registers the mainstreaming of ideas of temporary use into cultural and urban policies, and the extensive promotional work of intermediaries and other pop-up entrepreneurs discussed in the first part of this chapter.

Official pop-up shop schemes, however, account only for a small fraction of the many and diverse artistic practices that make use of empty shop fronts in London. As explained on the London-based visual arts web platform ‘Artquest’ in a section titled ‘how to set up an artist-led space’:

[T]here is a well-established history of artists taking over empty shops for temporary exhibitions or community projects, and in the current economic

⁶⁴ From a conversation with Werner, a London-based visual artist in his mid-twenties, 15th July 2010, London.

downturn such activity is being actively supported both by local councils and artist networks.⁶⁵

As apparent in this text, the well-established history refers to two very different and arguably opposite artistic activities in vacant shop-fronts: temporary exhibitions and community projects. Before I address the tradition of community art projects, in this section I will briefly expand on the logic of artistic exhibitions in vacant space, and particularly in shops, and its connections with and implications for other imaginaries and practices of cultural and political occupation in London.

For many young artists trying to gain visibility in London, a ‘pop-up’ shop is generally thought to be a good platform for exhibiting. As explained by Werner:

In London there are so many artists, so, obviously there’s a lot of people who can’t show anywhere for whatever reason. And who want to be seen. So [a pop-up] seems a good idea because that’s all in okay spaces that are not... tainted by association [...] because once you are out it might not be a gallery again, so you don’t have to live with, to deal with... the association... which is quite important [...] if you are showing in an empty shop [...] a pop-up store, a pop-up space.⁶⁶

Temporary exhibitions in shop fronts thus become a convenient site of visibility for emerging artists unable to find other venues or uncertain about associating their name with a specific art gallery. The temporary dimension, moreover, is often used in promoting the exhibitions through a sense of urgency, not unlike the way in which pop-up retail promotes an experience of buzz and exclusivity around a new product. National and local media have been drawing on this urgency to promote short-term venues as ‘secret art spaces’, as in a 2011 feature ran by the popular weekly magazine *Time Out London* titled ‘Secret Galleries. Discover the best galleries you never knew existed... Visit them this weekend!’⁶⁷

The *Time Out London* list included the artist-run *Auto Italia South East* space [fig. 3.10] described as “an old VW garage [that] has been hijacked by young artists

⁶⁵ ‘Artquest’ is a popular web platform launched in 2001 by the visual arts department of the London office of Arts Council England (then London Arts) and by University of the Arts London (then The London Institute). The platform “encourages critical engagement and provides practical support to visual artists at any stage in their careers.” See <http://www.artquest.org.uk/articles/view/empty-shops> [accessed 21st September 2011].

⁶⁶ Conversation with Werner 15th July 2010.

⁶⁷ Time Out London 2011: Secret Galleries. Discover the best galleries you never knew existed... Visit them this weekend! *Time Out London Magazine*, 23rd February – 3rd March 2011.

as a chop-shop of performance art, lectures, symposia”⁶⁸. The use of the adjective ‘hijacked’ indirectly implied a subversive action of spatial appropriation, which could be read as a symbolic hijack from a garage to an exciting art gallery, but which could also hint at something less licit.

Chop-shop collective

Auto Italia South East ▼

An old VW garage off the Old Kent Road has been hijacked by young artists as a chop-shop of performance art, lectures, exhibitions and symposia. Alongside irregular but well-attended music and club nights, they even turned the space into a fully fledged independent television station last year. The lively scene of nearby Peckham also revolves around an unlikely hub of galleries, hidden in an industrial estate that includes the Hannah Barry and Son galleries. *Auto Italia, 1 Glengall Rd, SE15 6NJ* (www.autoitaliasoutheast.org). See www.timeout.com/art for next show.

Similar space...

The Woodmill offers a blend of screenings, exhibitions, live events and affordable studios within the giant hangar-like spaces of an ex-council building in Bermondsey (Neckinger Depot, SE16 3QN; www.woodmill.org). It's also the current home of two other local artist-run collectives, Lucky PDF and Off Modern.



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Figure 3.10 ‘Chop-Shop Collective’. *Source*: Time Out London, Secret Galleries, p. 15.

Indeed, while on their website *Auto-Italia South East* collective presents itself as providing “a framework for developing alternative approaches to practice and exhibition formats [...] working out of temporary donated buildings in south east London”⁶⁹, the project started in a squatted space. As recounted by Werner, the collective had initially occupied a vacant car showroom, whence the name, subsequent to which they negotiated an agreement with the owner and finally approached the local authority to ask for a vacant building to reuse rent-free:

⁶⁸ Time Out London, Secret Galleries, p. 15.

⁶⁹ *Auto-Italia South East* website, <http://autoitaliasoutheast.org/about/> [accessed 15th November 2011].

They got in contact with the owner through the Council, or a councillor, gave them basically their portfolio and said, listen, we are being chucked out of this space, we squatted it, we kept it, we did this and this to it, this is what happened in the space, we'd like to stay in the council to do these projects, and they basically showed how serious they were, and what they had done, the rest of it. And the owner said ok. They are very enterprising.⁷⁰

The imaginary of artists and art collectives overstepping the legal boundaries in order to make or exhibit art, and the idea that such actions bear witness to the seriousness of their vocation and to their enterprising spirit, is a common trope about the emerging art scene and is often reproduced in media representations. The joint publication *The Art Newspaper/Frieze Art Fair Daily*, a magazine distributed for free at the London commercial art fair Frieze in 2009, for instance, dedicated a full page to an article titled 'Do it yourself: pop-up galleries':

What resources do you need to start up a contemporary art gallery in London? You must have inexhaustible reserves of energy, a large helping of missionary zeal, and a healthy dose of chutzpah. A network of friends willing to help out on a voluntary basis probably helps. Surprisingly, though, you don't need much money. These are the consistent responses from a disparate group of young gallerists and emerging dealers currently active in London. [...] The minimum budget required to put on a show [...] is zero—provided you can beg, steal or borrow a space.⁷¹

As observed in the narratives associated with the official discourse of temporary reuse, pop-up art galleries are presented as free for all sites of connectivity, where once the space is granted rent-free, all the social, economic and financial infrastructures required to run it are ready to fall smoothly into place through the 'inexhaustible reserves of energy' of the artist-entrepreneur. The positive entrepreneurial imaginary presented and promoted here is oblivious to the many social, economic and spatial barriers that face practitioners trying to set up temporary spaces in contemporary London. As will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, the discrepancy between this entrepreneurial discourse and the materialities of temporary use is an important source of frustration and critical reflection for

⁷⁰ Conversation with Werner, 15th July 2010.

⁷¹ Millar, B. 2009: Do it yourself: pop-up galleries. *The Art Newspaper/Frieze Art Fair Daily*, p. 5.

practitioners caught between the myth of creative entrepreneurships and complex dynamics of cultural labour and urban development.

Self-reflections on careerism and temporary venues

In *The Art Newspaper*'s article, *Auto-Italia South East* is associated with the *James Taylor Gallery* as the two most successful recent examples of London's DIY no budget pop-up art spaces. The two artists who founded the *James Taylor Gallery* (JTG) in 2008 had successfully negotiated rent-free use of a 10,000 sq. foot warehouse in Hackney, North London. The previous uses of the space and its unfinished character are heavily drawn from in their online self-representation: "formerly a factory, china warehouse, squat, and film location, the raw condition and exceptional size of the building presents an exciting challenge to exhibitors".⁷² The 'raw conditions' and the 'exceptional size' are clearly represented as challenges that enable ambitious and experimental site-specific work.

In a public discussion of self-organised 'fringe' temporary art spaces that took place on the at *Auto-Italia South East*, titled 'Towards a zoology of spaces', *James Taylor Gallery* (JTG) co-founders Julia Crabtree and Will Evans explained that when they moved into the space they had to clear and clean the space thoroughly, fix the electricity and water, and had no heating.⁷³ After the landowner evicted the squatters who were living in the space, the artists were allowed to use it on a rolling month-by-month lease on the condition that they would act as guardians of the space by using it as living, working and exhibition space. The founders admitted that the landlord let them occupy it because "we are not as aggressive and terrifying as squatters" and because they had agreed to be moved on as soon as the property became again "ripe for redevelopment".⁷⁴

As commented by Werner, successful temporary art venues like *Auto-Italia South East* and JTG have nothing to do with squatted space: they are professional operations interested in furthering the organisers' careers as artists and curators.⁷⁵ In this sense, the reach of no budget spaces such as *Auto-Italia South East* and the

⁷² James Taylor Gallery website, <http://jtg.org.uk/about/> [accessed 27th November 2011].

⁷³ The 'Towards a zoology of spaces' event took place on the 16th January 2010, as can be seen in their 2010 press release, *source*: www.autoitaliasoutheast.org [accessed 12th September 2011]. The panel included several representatives from self-organised art spaces in London.

⁷⁴ Comment by Julia Crabtree, *ibid*.

⁷⁵ Interview with Werner, 15th July 2010.

James Taylor Gallery belong to the commercial art sector, and to the faster pace of the scene of independent commercial and some non-commercial art fairs, which happen annually around the time of the commercial international Frieze Art Fair, such as Free Art Fair, Zoo Art Fair and the Sluice art fair. The relationship between temporary not-for-profit ‘fringe’ art spaces and the established art scene was a crucial issue raised several times in the course of the public discussion. While some practitioners argued that they were reclaiming autonomous spaces to ‘do things without the threat of being always monetised’, an audience member polemically stated that “the career question is the elephant in the room. Who do we think is watching us? To whom are these spaces addressed?”⁷⁶ That sparked a heated discussion between the panellists and the audience.

According to another audience member, temporary art venues are co-opted in the same way as the DiY art-squat movement of the early 1990s in London was recuperated by the expansion of the contemporary art market in times of recession. Dismissing the orthodox narrative of ‘pioneering’ squatted art spaces such as the ‘Bank’ and ‘City Racing’, he argued that the so-called fringe art sector back then was in fact mostly career-driven and fuelled by a rising art market with vast amounts of disposable capital. Artistic success at the time was measured ‘by being bought by Saatchi’, a reference to art collector Charles Saatchi’s visit to the mythical ‘Freeze’ exhibition (July 1988), which took place in an empty London Port Authority building at Surrey Docks in the Docklands, and became a milestone on the path to fame for the Young British Artists.

Such myths and histories continue to haunt present-day London’s art scene, as many 1990s ‘fringe’ practitioners went on to become acclaimed and commercially successful art-world stars. An example of British Art entrepreneurship that comes as an oft-quoted shop-front precedent is Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas’s ‘The Shop’ (1993), when the artists rented for six months a former doctor’s surgery in Bethnal Green where they made and sold solo and collaborative work. In late 2009, its ephemera were included in the Tate Modern exhibition *Pop Life: Art in a Material World* (1st October 2009 – 17th January 2010) as part of a celebration of “artists’ public persona as a product, and their relationship with commerce and glamour”.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Notes from ‘Towards a zoology of spaces’ event.

⁷⁷ Tracey Emin discusses ‘The Shop’, Tate Events, <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/eventseducation/talksdiscussions/20637.htm> [accessed 20th November

The professional status acquired by 'fringe' spaces is often reinforced by large scale public cultural institutions, and the Tate Modern is one of the many publicly funded art institutions that capitalise on the 'fringe' imaginaries of temporary spaces, validating them and, in so doing, validating themselves as 'at the cutting edge' of experimental art production and consumption. Since their beginnings in a squatted car showroom *Auto-Italia's* position in the contemporary art scene has grown until their inclusion at the event *No Soul for Sale: A Festival for Independents* (NSFS), a 'pop-up village of global art' hosted by Tate Modern in the Turbine Hall as part of their 10 year anniversary festivities.⁷⁸ The example of 'No Soul for Sale' can be seen as indication of the conflictive power relations between public institutions and 'fringe' experiments, and of a culture of symbolic value extraction. As someone from the audience provocatively remarked, temporary arts spaces ultimately are 'market facilitators' that rely on the artists' charitable economy but feed monetised economy elsewhere.⁷⁹

Such self-representations, institutional accounts and media narratives reproduce many of the themes associated with the mythical 'golden age' of urban 'fringe' art spaces and artistic experimentation of the 1970s and 1980s in metropolitan New York and London discussed in Chapter 1.⁸⁰ The reproduction of a connection between artistic experimentation, derelict vacant spaces and no-budget enterprises contributes to the romantic myth of the poor-but-talented artists whose vocation is measured through their choice to value cultural capital against the economic capital allegedly valorised by mainstream society.⁸¹ While the artistic practices analysed in this and the following chapters prefer to align themselves to the community-oriented tradition, rather than to the pop-up careerist art shows, the existence and promotion of semi-licit self-organised temporary art venues and pop-

2011].

⁷⁸ See <http://www.nosoulsforsale.com/2010> [accessed 11th October 2011]. The event took place over a weekend in May 2010 as a fair-style installation, with participants exhibiting alongside each other without partitions or walls. The inclusion of 'fringe' independent art spaces event in their 10-year celebration program caused some controversy in the not-for-profit art sector. A group of artists and cultural practitioners came together to draft an open letter titled 'No Soul for Sale: the elephant in the room', lamenting the lack of any fees or reimbursement for participants and calling for Tate Modern to stop exploitative labour conditions and the culture of free labour. 'No Soul for Sale? Addressing the elephant in the room' letter circulated on various art e-lists and published on the 'Making a Living' blog, <http://makingliving.blogspot.com/> later taken down for fear of legal repercussions.

⁷⁹ Notes from 'Towards a zoology of spaces event'.

⁸⁰ Greenberg, M. 2008: *Branding New York: how a city in crisis was sold to the world*. London: Routledge, p. 145.

⁸¹ As discussed by Lloyd, R.D. 2006: *Neo-Bohemia: art and commerce in the postindustrial city*. London: Routledge.

up stores constitute an important discursive imaginary against which critical practitioners articulate their positions and rationales.

The £100 Shop in Dalston

As I discussed in Chapter 1, the development of the ‘fringe’ neo-bohemian mythology surrounding artistic occupations of urban vacancy has been accompanied by an important wave of critical site-specific artistic practices that have occupied urban spaces as a form of artistic and political public critique of mainstream urban dynamics. For art practitioners of this ‘new genre public art’, projects in urban spaces moved from a politicised awareness of the role of culture in the promotion and reproduction of imaginaries of urban development, and of artists’ own positionality in relation to urban change, particularly in large Western cities.⁸² Critical practitioners operating within this genre have used this awareness and experience of symbolic and material urban dynamics to develop site-specific projects that address their complex positions. Drawing on this tradition of artistic urban critique, the project ‘The £100 Shop’ (2010) occupied a shop front in Dalston, Hackney, as a critical intervention into local discourse of artistic temporary reuse.

Hackney Council had been the only London council to receive the DCLG grant, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and its ‘Art in Empty Spaces’ programme had been particularly successful. As stated on the website [fig. 3.11], the aim of the scheme was:

to provide a platform for local artists utilising empty commercial space across the Borough. We hope to have an embedded empty properties plan, helping to support our local economy, promote the arts and support community cohesion ensuring that Hackney’s creative and cultural base has an opportunity to showcase to the rest of the world.⁸³

⁸² See Miles, M. 1997: *Art Space and the City: Public art and urban futures*. London: Routledge.

⁸³ <http://artinemptyspaces.org.uk/> [accessed 13th March 2011].

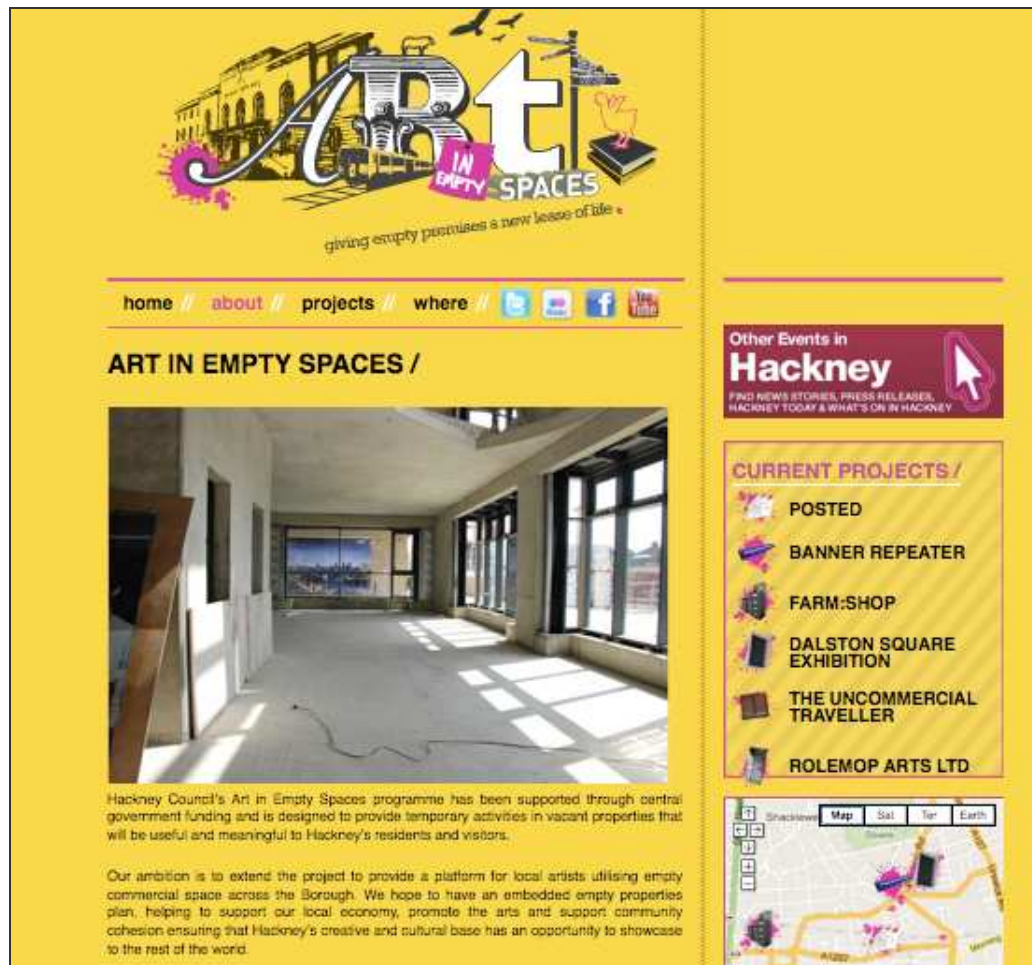


Figure 3.11 Screenshot of Hackney Council's 'Art in Empty Spaces' scheme [13th March 2011].

As analysed in relation to the official narrative of temporary vacant space reuse, the council reproduced the connection between temporary art projects and as a means of furthering Hackney's position as an art and culture destination for global tourists visiting London, particularly in the run up to the 2012 Olympic Games. Several of the projects sponsored or facilitated through the Art in Empty Spaces scheme took place in and around Dalston, a neighbourhood that had recently been subjected to large-scale developments. The artists involved in The £100 Shop project had all lived and worked in Dalston since the late 1990s, and had witnessed the impacts of infrastructural developments and the rapid gentrification of the neighbourhood. In the words of artist Alberto Duman:

as a citizen more than an artist necessarily, I saw myself really in a great conflict between the position of being a legitimised person in a certain process, as an artist in public art, but as a citizen who sees on the other hand his own experience in a certain part of the city devalued by the

transformations that were really going to change exactly the things that I liked about a certain place. As an artist I was also very aware of the previous experience of New York, gentrification, and how certain mechanisms had already [been] enshrined. So in a sense I had already understood the whole process, and finding... looking for a way out from certain traps, of how [...] culture is appropriated in order to signify [urban] change.⁸⁴

The opportunity to act upon this conflict arrived in late 2008 following a discussion with an architect working on the development of Dalston Square, a large development realised on a plot of land owned by Hackney Council and Transport for London, which included over 700 new apartments, a library, a public square and large retail spaces.⁸⁵ To justify the positive impact of redevelopment, the architect commented on the negative visual and social effect of the many £1 pound shops that characterised the inner city neighbourhood as ‘urban blight’. As retold by The £100 Shop’s artist Michele Panzeri, at that point:

somebody else said: “well, what you are doing is get the one pound shop owners and move them out of the city, you know, just move them to Leyton [neighbourhood further east in Greater London] and then eventually they’ll have to move out of Leyton. You are just moving out people, you are not re-qualifying it. You know, you should just help people to build a £100 shop!”⁸⁶

From this humorous remark came the idea to create a fully functioning £100 Shop, where £1 shop items would be sold for £100. The project would take place precisely in one of the now vacant shops that had been forced to close along the neighbourhood’s shopping street, Kingsland High Street, and would embody in a hyperbolic way the imaginary of a vibrant Dalston as dreamt by developers and produced by gentrification, ‘hybridising the luxury shop and the lowest end’ of budget shops:

[W]e had this image that kept repeating, this idea of the look of a Prada shop, somehow, brought about in a high street where the one pound shop was still the dominant form of identification of what Dalston was about. A popular market, budget shops, unpretentious bars, not yet the kind of cappuccino

⁸⁴ Conversation with Alberto Duman, Alistair Siddons and Michele Panzeri of The £100 Shop, 2nd March 2011.

⁸⁵ See www.dalstonsquare.co.uk/ [accessed 11th May 2011].

⁸⁶ Conversation with The £100 Shop practitioners, 2nd March 2011.

society that it would eventually become.⁸⁷

Finding a place and budget to realise the project proved difficult. When Hackney Council launched its 'Art in Empty Spaces' scheme in early 2010 the practitioners thought that this would be a good opportunity to carry out their project, but their application was unsuccessful. Unsurprisingly, in the rejection letter the artists realised that decisions about pop-up art shops in Hackney were not taken by the Council's own cultural department, but by a committee of the Five Olympic Host boroughs, which was at the time closely policing the image of the borough as projected to the world at large.⁸⁸

Lacking institutional support from the Arts Council and from the local authority, after long negotiations the practitioners were finally able to borrow for two weeks during November 2010 the shop front of Centerprise community centre on Kingsland High Street. Since the practitioners could appropriate only the window, they thought of "a new aesthetic, like 'look but don't touch'", something like "entering in those kinds of customs, you know, of shop fittings, which are the betting shops and sex shops".⁸⁹ In this way, instead of 'activating' the site by opening it to social activities, they blocked the shop window and created a sense of uneasiness, with many passers-by and shoppers coming through the door afraid that the bookshop too had been forced to close down by the rising rents like many other independent shops in the neighbourhood. The experience of a blocked shop window can be seen already as subversion of the positive impact of temporary use, evoking instead closure, secrecy and displacement [figures 3.12 and 3.13].

⁸⁷ Conversation with The £100 Shop practitioners, 2nd March 2011.

⁸⁸ As explained by the artists, "the empty shop fund was not prescriptive about its uses. It was suggesting art as one of its possible use, but not its only use. Therefore it was not administered by the cultural unit because it was not specifically about art... It could have been social enterprise, it could have been, a library, it could have been, it could have been any kind of.... worthy project [such as] the Farm: Shop on Dalston Lane". Conversation with £100 Shop collective, 2nd March 2011.

⁸⁹ Ibid. Alberto added: "the idea of a vitrine was interesting because by making a vitrine you were making impossible for people to look into the shop. So you are entering in those kinds of customs, you know, of shop fittings, which are the betting shops and sex shops.[...] Interestingly enough Hackney council is the borough with the highest amount of betting shops. And the other, there's been a lot of litigations in the way strip clubs and sex shops have been recently outlawed in Hackney and there is not going to be any more licences given out [...]".



Figure 3.12 The £100 Shop. *Source:* www.onehundredpoundshop.com [accessed 22nd March 2011].



Figure 3.13 Detail of £100 Shop. *Source:* www.onehundredpoundshop.com [accessed 22nd March 2011].

On the white sheet that covered the shop window was a webpage address, linked to a functioning e-commerce website where £1 items could be purchased for

£100, and a pre-purchase agreement, which was available inside the shop and which constituted the only explicit ‘key’ to interpret the project. The agreement was phrased and designed as a legal document, but on close reading revealed itself to be an analysis and ironic commentary on the transformations of Dalston and on the relationship between creative symbolic economies and gentrification.⁹⁰ Reading ‘The £100 Shop’ in relation to the official Hackney narrative of the ‘Art in Empty Spaces’ schemes and to the idea of the Meanwhile reuse, it can be argued that the project took very seriously the promise of the ‘something else awaiting to happen’, by collapsing this temporal gap and delivering an hyperbolic embodiment of the urban growth that the council aspired to, and its predictable gentrification.⁹¹ The extent to which the subtle critique of ‘The £100 Shop’ constituted a public intervention in the urban imaginary, however, remains difficult to assess, as the project demanded a high degree of familiarity with the relationship between cultural policies and gentrification in order to interpret its nature as a parody.⁹²

‘Not a pop-up!’ The position of community artists

Returning to the ‘Artquest’ quotation discussed at the beginning of the second half of this chapter about the ‘well-established history of artists taking over empty shops’, the second set of practices that I want to address is broadly defined as ‘community projects’, a term encompassing socially-engaged art practices, institutional community outreach and arts education programmes. According to Owen Kelly, the origin of community arts in the UK was in wider activist movements that came to the surface in the late 1960s, when “artists claimed to share

⁹⁰ See The £100 Shop ‘pre-purchase agreement’, available on the project’s website http://www.onehundredpoundshop.com/our_promise_to_you.html [accessed 22nd March 2011].

⁹¹ The Centerprise Trust Community and Arts Centre was evicted by Hackney Council on the 2nd of November 2012 after a year-long legal battle. The Centerprise’s representatives said that council officials wanted to raise rent levels for the Kingsland High Street-based from £10 per year to £37,000 per year, a sudden drastic change that made it impossible for the centre to renegotiate their lease. See ‘Historical black bookshop evicted from Hackney premises’, *The Voice online* 6th November 2012, <http://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/historical-black-bookshop-evicted-hackney-premises> [accessed 12th December 2012] and Barnett, Adam, ‘Centerprise Bookshop seized by Hackney Council’, *Hackney Citizen online*, 4th November 2012, <http://hackneycitizen.co.uk/2012/11/04/centerprise-bookshop-seized-hackney-council/> [accessed 12th December 2012].

⁹² In relation to this question, it might be useful to return to a questioning of the role of irony and critique in ‘new genre public art’ debates. In *The Reenchantment of Art*, 1991, for instance, the artist and theorist Suzi Gablik argues for the need to move beyond deconstruction, parody and irony, which are seen as politically insufficient, towards socially engaged practices. Gablik, cited by Miles, *Art Space and the City*, p. 166.

the political, social and cultural goals of those other movements: the underground press, organised squatting, free festivals, the yippies and the Black Panthers”⁹³. In his critique, by the 1970s, these politicised practices had become professionalised, and by the 1980s the notion of community art had lost most of its critical edge and “allowed itself to be changed from an area of shared cultural activity, which was avowedly partisan, to an area of neutral professional concern, within which it was *possible* to be radical, but no longer obligatory or even helpful”.⁹⁴

Almost thirty years after Own Kelly’s critical insights, the reuse of vacant shop fronts for community-oriented projects constitutes an established form of local outreach for many London public art institutions and programmes. Between 2009 and 2011, several high profile public art galleries and cultural institutions ran a series of public outreach temporary shops, such as Tate Modern’s *Twenty For Harper Road*, a 32-day “temporary creative project space operating out of a disused travel-agent” at 24 Harper Road, Southwark.⁹⁵ While engagement with local schools, community groups and residents usually develops over many years, many of the venues opened as part of public outreach programmes tend to be short-lived.⁹⁶ In this context, the experience of the Serpentine Gallery’s *Centre for Possible Studies* (2008 – present), which took place in a series of vacant shops near Edgware Road, in the borough of Westminster, offers a different model of site-specific serial temporariness, as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

In such projects, the engagement with local communities is one of the central preoccupations for practitioners who strongly object to the idea of being represented as pop-up art exhibition spaces and who see themselves more aligned to process-based practices of participatory cultural production.⁹⁷ During our first conversations Rebecca, for instance, a community artist whose experience with the Studio at the Elephant temporary shop front project will be explored in more detail in Chapters 4

⁹³ Kelly, O. 1984: *Community, art and the state: storming the citadels*. London: Comedia, p. 1

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

⁹⁵ The shop acted as a platform for twenty projects in April 2010 and offered free workshops and activities “for people to assemble and talk, think and make creatively. Young artists, architects and musicians will each be programming a day of free events, activities and workshops in the space” as declared on their Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/twentyfor?sk=info> [accessed 10th November 2011].

⁹⁶ An important recent publication on community-outreach projects by small and large public art institutions which reflects upon these issues through the experiences of curators and facilitators of community programmes is Steedman, M. 2012. *Gallery as community: art, education, politics*. London: Whitechapel Gallery.

⁹⁷ See for instance Kester, G.H. 2004: *Conversation pieces: community and communication in modern art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

and 5, shared her frustration at being labelled as such by a member of the public on the last day of her first space:

I felt really bad when on the closing night this girl came up to me and said, so, how would you describe this space, is it like... pop-up? And I was like, ugh, no! It's only popped up because I have only been allowed to have this space for two weeks [...] it popped up because we were there for a short amount of time.⁹⁸

The frustration of being labelled a pop-up belongs partly to a desire to distance her work from the standard practice of temporary art shows and partly to underline the fact that her temporary presence in the space, a shop unit in a shopping centre, was the result of lack of funding and not of a deliberate intention to engage with local communities on a short-term basis.

A similar critique was raised by members of a young art collective called Goup+Work that in 2010 was awarded a small public grant to propose and manage a new artist-run space in Westminster.⁹⁹ The grant was part funded by Westminster Council and partly by the Arts Council England through a creative development agency for emerging artists called 'Emerge', which describes itself as "a catalyst for the visual arts, to reinspire and reinvigorate".¹⁰⁰ In their proposal for an artist-led exhibition and production space 'in dialogue with local communities', the artists were weary of short-term projects in vacant spaces, described as 'smash and grab' and were instead looking for the possibility of building longer-term relationships with a place.¹⁰¹ On this point, the young artists felt at odds with the agendas of one of the commissioning bodies:

Emerge's take on things and [their art consultant] is that... whatever it is, whether it comes to funding or just having a reputation, it's better more often than not just to do small things that lead on to something else and something else and something else, [so] you are demonstrating that you are able to do it, so that people trust and give you a space in the future. [...] the art consultant was in an artist collective in Shoreditch, Hoxton, Hackney in the 1990s [...]

⁹⁸ Conversation with Rebecca, practitioner of Studio at the Elephant, 15th December 2010.

⁹⁹ Emerge, 2010, Emerge Art Activist Commissions Guidelines. Accessed [Dec 2010] www.emergelondon.org.uk

¹⁰⁰ See Emerge webpage, www.emergelondon.org.uk/commissions/archive [accessed 11th March 2011].

¹⁰¹ Conversation with Group+Work practitioners, 6th May 2011.

and it was obviously [a] different kind of environment then. And her group did lots of ‘smash and grab’ kind of things [...].¹⁰²

In their account of the experience of the officers advising them throughout the commission, histories and myths of the 1990s scene of temporary art venues shaped the expectations of the commissioners, and the artists felt pressured to ‘just produce something’ such as a two-week exhibition or an event.¹⁰³

At the same time, they also experienced what they called a ‘non vocalised point of conflict’ with the other funder, the local authority, around the expectation that they would work with the most deprived communities in the borough:

one of the other big things was the pressure from Westminster council to engage with communities and look for a space in a deprived area [...] we’ve been thinking a lot about the role of artists and arts group to take on an empty property and jazz it up, and also, make life better for the people that live there in the community [...] there was always that pressure and checking up on us to make sure that we were getting in touch with people in the community [...] in the same way as we were pushed to be temporary when, at the end of the day, we were not bothered about exposure and furthering our careers.¹⁰⁴

The description of this double pressure clearly illustrates the tension between an entrepreneurial careerist art narrative, and the promise of art-led regeneration. Regardless of their initial project proposal, the collective felt that they were expected to ‘make life better’ for local people, which in publicly funded community-oriented art projects is often a shorthand for the most economically or socially deprived communities in a given location. At the opposite end, the description of the role of artists as ‘taking on empty properties to jazz them up’ implies recognition of the marketing agenda of artistic pop-ups, despite the fact that Emerge’s award was called ‘arts-activists’, on which point one artist commented ironically that maybe the commission “had to do with activating instead of activism!”¹⁰⁵ Mariette’s pun on ‘space activation’ points in the direction of tension between the promise of arts/activist autonomy and the encouraged assimilation of their project into the mainstream discourse of short-term pop-up projects as the ‘activation of people and places’.

¹⁰² Conversation with Group+Work practitioners, 6th May 2011.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Helen, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

In addition to positioning their project between these two diametrically opposite expectations, the artists had to enter negotiations with private landlords and private estate agents in order to obtain rent-free access to a vacant shop. After many unsuccessful phone calls and visits to local estate agents, they decided to develop a 'property pack' with information about their project, which used the economic benefit argument of the 'official' discourse of reuse present in mainstream media.¹⁰⁶ One of the artists, Helen, felt particularly strongly about being indirectly encouraged by two public organisations to reproduce mainstream narratives about the economic benefits of pop-up art projects and to use a language that they felt "really problematic":

[we were] constantly degrading what [we] wanted to do, in a way, because you say 'oh, actually, it's going to be good for you because [...] you are going to increase footfall, you are going to make the area more desirable for future investors and businesses' and so on, it's really, really horrible to say that kind of thing...!¹⁰⁷

In the experience of Group+Work, the ambiguous normative vision of pop-up activities of the official narrative created a conflict as their two public commissioners pulled the project, discursively and practically, in two very diverse directions. At the same time, the practical need to engage with the market logic of real estate agents brought them to reproduce elements of the set of 'official' discourses examined in the first half of this chapter. Ironically, after spending two months unsuccessfully trying to convince estate agencies and property owners, the artists were told by a property advisor that for their kind of project they would be better off squatting.¹⁰⁸ Although the remark was meant as a joke, it indicates the extent to which art and community-oriented practices of temporary reuse belong, in the collective imaginary, to an ambiguous field of semi-legal practices and spaces. The ambiguous relation between temporary vacant space reuse and squatted spaces in London will be the subject of the following and latter part of this chapter.

¹⁰⁶ Conversation with Group+Work practitioners, 6th May 2011.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Between artistic and political squats

While the official discourse of reuse promoted by the government, local authorities, the lobbies of private landowners and public art institutions is attentive to stressing the legal dimension of meanwhile and interim schemes, in the popular imaginary of art magazines and newspapers, as has been already shown, pop-up spaces inhabit the grey area of short-term countercultural practices whose presence in empty spaces could be the result of unlawful activities, such as squatting. In the mainstream discourse of empty space reuse and pop-up shops, the symbolic vicinity of lawful to unlawful occupations not only is not a taboo, but can also be seen to provide an added value as artists exploit the sense of unexpected and unfinished offered by the association with spaces and practices belonging to the countercultural urban imaginary.

The case of the performance art platform ArtEvict is emblematic of many practices moving in between squatted and legal empty space reuse. The first event organised by ArtEvict was motivated by a classified ad posted on the popular online art listing and newsletter Arts Jobs, which required performance artists for a free event in a venue near Elephant and Castle, in Southwark.¹⁰⁹ When Hikaru, a London-based Japanese performance artist in her early 20s, met the organiser of the event she discovered that the venue was a squatted pub and that the performance was to take place during a party on the last night before the eviction of the squat. For the occasion Hikaru and a group of fellow performance artists created the collective ArtEvict, and from December 2009 until February 2011 went on to organise performances in squatted and legal venues across the city. Besides paper leaflets [fig. 3.14], in order to advertise their events and to store visual documentation of their action-based work, ArtEvict ran a website, an extensive e-list and a blog where they described their performances in a highly poetic language, where the squatted spaces are often evoked as empty backgrounds for their experimental and performative pieces.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ The original web posting has been archived and was impossible to retrieve.

¹¹⁰ See <http://aetxt.blogspot.co.uk> [accessed 11th March 2012].

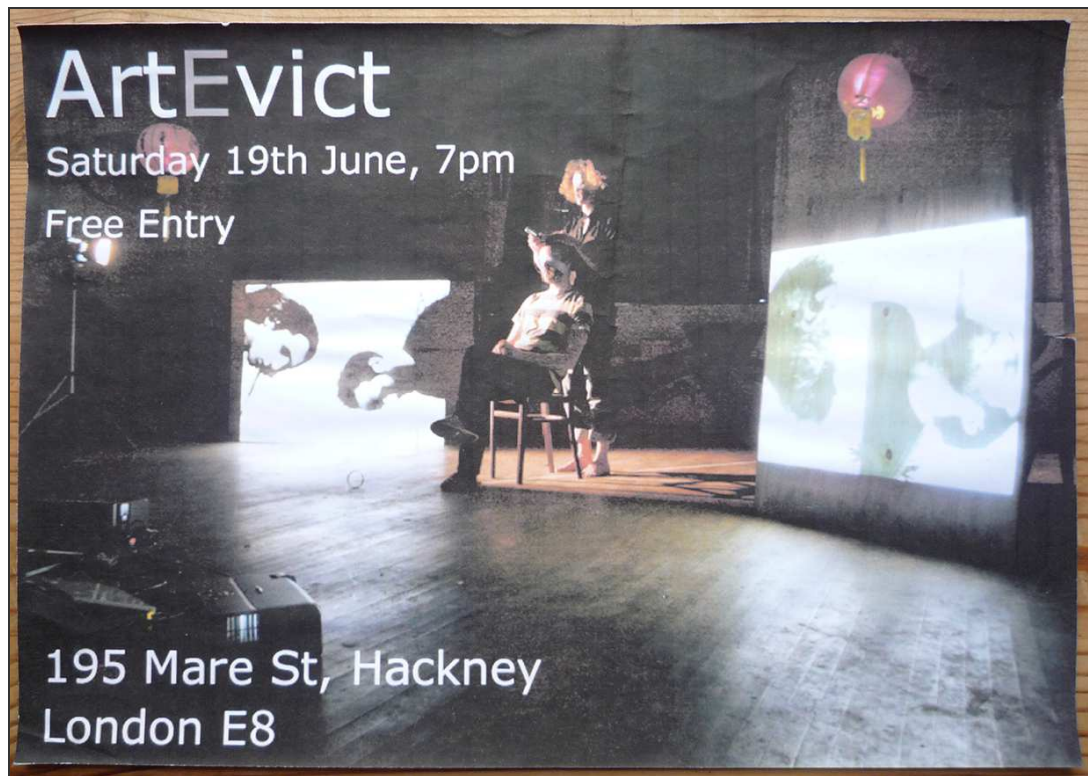


Figure 3.14 ArtEvict flyer 19th June 2011. *Source:* personal archive.

A review by a fellow performance art group called OUI Performance posted on ArtEvict website expands on the relationship between the practitioners and the spaces in a long essay celebrating the collective:

ArtEvict happens in empty disused buildings, forgotten spaces, usually squats, [...] Using spaces such as this, those that in a social context are in direct opposition to state control are also, in an artistic context in direct opposition to the institutionalized control exercised by theatres and galleries. This negation from establishment happens in the event of it taking place in these particular contexts, and permits ArtEvict to perform its own autonomy and simultaneously perform its political stance. This idea mirrors Hakim Bey's concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) [...] As such, for ArtEvict to happen it must keep moving, between abandoned spaces, between artists, between practices and between times.¹¹¹

Couched in this poetic language is a direct reproduction of the myth of temporary autonomy, both from 'state control' and from institutional sites of art and culture identified by theatres and galleries. In all their promotional materials, however,

¹¹¹ Victoria Gray and Nathan Walker: O U I Performance, *Out of Time: Group Action and Temporary Autonomous Zone*, almost, 11th January 2011, <http://aetxt.blogspot.co.uk> [accessed 11th March 2012].

squatted spaces, which ArtEvict practitioners stressed as central to their practice and their collective name, are represented as strangely depopulated, which seems once again to reproduce the narratives of activating emptiness that informs mainstream discourses of vacant space reuse.¹¹²

While the excitement of the ‘slightly illicit’¹¹³ rubs off onto mainstream temporary spaces gained through licit means, as in pop-up retail, the experience and positioning of ArtEvict points at a different set of practices and practitioners that inhabit ‘illicit’ spaces occupied through squatting, yet maintain a legitimate artistic profile in their self-representation. This curious semi-licit positioning reflected a short period of positive media representation of London squats as ‘creative’ and ‘middle class’, around the middle of the 2000s. To understand such ambiguous representation, in the following section I will address the discursive and political context within which this distinction between temporary vacant reuse and squatted spaces was articulated and performed, particularly in relation to the shift in the public debates around squatting after the UK general elections in May 2010.

‘Good squatters’ and ‘bad squatters’

The imaginary of squatters in modern British media has always been informed by contradictory and often polarised representations. Writing about the relationship between the British squatting movement and mainstream media, critical media scholar Bob Franklin defined it as “a symbiotic – albeit often viciously antagonistic – relationship”.¹¹⁴ Early coverage of 1960s urban squatting broadly “helped to reinforce the popular perception of squatting as a legitimate response to the co-existence of empty properties and homelessness”.¹¹⁵ But from the late 1960s, newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Evening Standard* and *The Times* joined in “one of the most vicious, scurrilous and sustained campaigns of abuse ever mounted against homeless people in Britain”¹¹⁶, which reached a peak in summer 1975 when

¹¹² Observation notes from ArtEvict, 12th July 2011, at 195 Mare Street squat.

¹¹³ See for instance the description in a *Financial Times* article praising the ‘underground feel’ of pop-up shops and temporary retail, Sunshine, B. 2008: Edgy, secret and slightly illicit. *Financial Times*, 26th January 2008.

¹¹⁴ Franklin, B. 1999: *Social Policy, the Media and Misrepresentation*. London: Routledge, p. 107.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 108.

The Times wrote an editorial calling for squatting to become a criminal offence. As explained by Franklin:

The press campaign against squatters was to achieve its objective of getting the law tightened (although not in making squatting illegal). It had also succeeded in permanently tarring squatters as politically motivated layabouts and misfits, who jumped local authority waiting lists, moved into people's homes when they were away on holiday, vandalised the houses they occupied – and weren't even really homeless or in need anyway.¹¹⁷

The distinction made by this media campaign between the deserving and the underserving homeless, the 'good' and the 'bad' squatters, was replicated in media representations in the mid-2000s. Building on the visibility of a string of high profile inner city art squats such as the *DA! Collective* and the *Oubliette Art House*¹¹⁸, national and local newspapers and magazines seemed to promote near-acceptable imaginaries of what was termed 'a new breed of squatters', characterized as creative workers and young professionals.¹¹⁹

The profile offered by the media was remarkably similar across the political spectrum of newspapers, and amounted to a redefinition of squatting as the lifestyle choice of well-educated middle-class individuals finding themselves temporarily outside the housing market or in precarious employment.¹²⁰ The new 'middle-class squatters' have jobs, if precarious, and enjoy the disposable income that squatting affords them. The *Oubliette Art House* collective was taken to embody this 'new breed' of creative 'good' squatters, who publicly claimed 'we're not squatters'. The PR-savvy group that occupied seven high profile locations in Central and West London between middle 2009 and late 2010, consciously reproduced the 'good' squatters discourse by distinguishing themselves from political countercultural

¹¹⁷ Franklin, *Social Policy*, pp. 107-108.

¹¹⁸ See for instance Littlejohn, G. 2009: 'Our £20m squat in a premiere location'. *London Lite*, 27th October 2009.

¹¹⁹ This was exemplified by an article titled 'Free house minders available' in *The Daily Telegraph*, in which the new squatters were described as young professionals: fashion designers, artists, students, self-employed businessmen, architects, journalists, teachers, translators, waiters and chefs. The article was accompanied by a photo of 6 young people sitting on the stone staircase of a Victorian property, smiling at the camera, in a friendly attitude antithetic to the paper's customary depictions of squatters. Little, W. 2006: Free house minders available. *The Daily Telegraph*, 11th November 2006.

¹²⁰ See a commentary that appeared in *The Observer* in 2010 about a high profile party in a squatted mansion in Mayfair. The 'new squatters' are described as "young, middle-class and disillusioned [...] hedonists looking for space to spread their message of liberty and creativity", see Starks, J. 2010. Squatters' rites. *The Observer*, 14th March 2010.

spaces that “tend to be chaotic and anarchic”.¹²¹ Their declared aim was “to turn squatting into a legitimate way to showcase art”, offering in exchange property caretaking for free as well as professionally credited plumbing skills.¹²² Their occupations are described, in this article as in others about the group, as graphic designers, IT and public relations personnel.¹²³ The photos accompanying articles in the press and on their website show a group of 5 or 6 individuals, leaning against the outside of an occupied property, dressed ‘smart casual’, posing as if for a lifestyle magazine.¹²⁴



Figure 3.15 ‘We’re not squatters’. Source: *The Guardian*, 21st December 2009.

The representation of ‘good squatters’ as creative professionals promoted a myth of ‘creative’ occupations that obscured the main social root causes of squatting in the capital. Matthew Hyland acutely dissects this myth and its pernicious implications in an editorial piece of the critical London-based *Mute Magazine*.¹²⁵ Reviewing the independent documentary on the life of squatters in London *5 ½ Roofs* (2006), he notes that “the film-makers are anxious to show that not all squatters are criminal, drug addicted, disease carrying, Ecover resistant social

¹²¹ Pidd, H. 2009: ‘We’re not squatters,’ says art group occupying Mayfair mansion. *The Guardian*, 21st December 2009.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Littlejohn, G. 2009: ‘Our £20m squat in a premiere location’. *London Lite*, 27th October 2009.

¹²⁴ In 2012, a member of the Oubliette Art House went on to found a non-profit company called ‘Interim Ltd’ for the promotion of creative interim uses of vacant spaces, see <http://www.interimspaces.co.uk> [accessed 13th November 2012].

¹²⁵ Hyland, M. 2007: Embedded Adventurism. *Mute Magazine* [online].

stains”¹²⁶ by interviewing squatters who work ‘nine to five’ in a professional architecture firm.

For Hyland, representations of middle-class professional squatters reinforce the flipside of the myth where squatters can be seen as “young opportunists with plenty of leisure and no rent to pay, playing around in damaged neighbourhoods, oblivious to the problems of the poor next door who pay in full”.¹²⁷ By not addressing the material reasons why even young professionals are forced out of necessity to squat, revealing the age and level of education of a section of the squatters’ community makes squatting look like “a cheap holiday in other people’s misery”.¹²⁸ The celebration of middle-class entrepreneurship, as opposed to focusing on the need for affordable housing and working spaces, can be seen as legitimising a certain neo-bohemian idea of squatters as ‘lifestyle avant-gardists’.¹²⁹ With the fluctuating legitimisation of such a position by the press “the function imagined for squatting is spelled out quite clearly: a minority taste that complements the proper range of capitalist life-skills; a quirky cultural niche in the market surrounding it”.¹³⁰

In the first few months of the Coalition government, a further connection was to be made between this newly legitimised lifestyle squatting imaginary and the ‘austerity localism’ of the Big Society discourse, to the extent that a London-based artist-squatter interviewed by the *Independent*, claimed that ‘squatting is the perfect example of the Big Society’.¹³¹ The bringing together of libertarian anti-state ideals and the enforced scarcity of budgetary reductions was registered in puzzled conversations in the London activist-squatting scene too. Faced with the discursive promotion of notions of collective self-organisation, autonomy and ‘free’ schooling, some activists from the East London squatting scene felt it important to host a public reading and discussion of Phillip Blond’s *Red Tory* (2010) whose ideas informed the

¹²⁶ Hyland, Embedded adventurism.

¹²⁷ In associating squatting to ideas of adventure, the film cultivated a depiction of squatters that, according to Hyland, “demonstrated the truth of an axiom that directly links ‘way of life’ squatting to [...] the ‘edgy’/‘gritty’/‘vibrant’ part of the real estate market: *all ‘adventure’ not driven by necessity is TOURISM*”, *ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* See also Conlin, P. 2009: Slack, Taut and Snap: A Report on the Radical Incursions Symposium. *Mute Magazine* [online].

¹³¹ Bell, M. 2011: Home truths: ‘Squatting is the perfect example of the Big Society’, Sunday, *The Independent*, 29th May 2011.

‘Big Society’ agenda.¹³² While members of the squatting movement deconstructed the fallacies in Blond’s argument, others began organising against the Conservative Party’s intention to make squatting a criminal offence, as pledged in their 2010 electoral manifesto.¹³³

The honeymoon of the national and local press with the myth of middle-class creative squatters was short. Between October 2010 and early 2011, as student occupations multiplied across universities in the UK, many free London-wide daily newspapers started propagating sensationalist and negative depictions of squatting on a weekly basis.¹³⁴ The London paper *The Evening Standard*, for instance, ran a series of articles and editorials on the squatting issue, asking the government for a firmer action and a review of the existing legal framework.¹³⁵ The paper, distributed for free since late 2009, has an average net circulation of over 600,000 copies daily and can be easily found in London’s public transport network, which greatly extends the newspaper’s reach in the capital.¹³⁶ An even more active stance was taken by *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph* with their ‘Stop the Squatting’ campaign through a series of articles from the middle of February to the middle of March 2011, the papers promoted a negative picture of squatters and argued for the necessity to change the existing legislation, deploying similar arguments as the 1975 media campaign discussed earlier.¹³⁷

¹³² The event was organised as part of the ‘London Free School’ at a squatted venue, 195 Mare Street, on 25th July 2010. The transcript of the discussion ‘We are not the “Big Society”’ was later published on Indymedia on 17th September 2010. Blond, P. 2010. *Red Tory: how the left and right have broken Britain and how we can fix it*. London: Faber and Faber.

¹³³ Conservative Party 2010: *The Conservative Manifesto 2010*, p. 56.

¹³⁴ Smith, H. 2011: ‘I came from Lithuania to squat in £5m home’. *Metro*, 7th January 2011.

¹³⁵ Examples include: Dominiczak, P. 2010: Basking in the Limelight...art squatters take over superclub. *The Evening Standard*, 16th December 2010; Moore-Bridger, B. 2011: Squatters sent packing as they try to ‘re-house’ themselves in £7m home. *The Evening Standard*, 18th January 2011; Parsons, R. 2011: ‘Resistance Party’ at Ritchie squat. *The Evening Standard*, 18th February 2011; Parsons, R. 2011: Squatters quit Guy’s £6m house... for a pub lock-in. *The Evening Standard*, 21st February 2011.

¹³⁶ A direct response to *The Evening Standard*’s attack was published on the independent media website *Indymedia* by the Advisory Service for Squatters, who linked squatting to the hundred of thousands of properties that are claimed to lay empty across Britain http://london.indymedia.org/other_medias/5919 [accessed 16th June 2012].

¹³⁷ A quick overview: Hollingshead, I. 2011: Lock, stock and squatters. A dozen invaders in a salubrious London square have Guy Ritchie over a barrel. *The Daily Telegraph*, 16th February 2011; Hamilton-Brown, J. 2011: Burglar alarm? No problem. Squatters pool their skills on the internet to find new homes, *The Daily Telegraph*, 27th February 2011; Harrison, D. 2011: ‘I’m forced to beg squatters through my own letterbox’. *The Sunday Telegraph*, 27th February 2011. On the same date was published the letter ‘Squatting laws endorse theft’. On the 6th of March, *The Daily Telegraph* published the editorial ‘Stop the squatters: criminalise this unjust behaviour’ and the editorial comment ‘How squatters evade the law’.

Particularly vitriolic was the paper's attack on the 'Really Free School' [fig. 3.16] an itinerant collective and open platform that facilitated free and non-hierarchical workshops across four high profile squatted venues in Central London, between January and April 2011.¹³⁸ The space defined itself "a pop-up space with no fixed agenda, unlimited in scope, [that] aims to cultivate equality through collaboration and horizontal participation"¹³⁹.

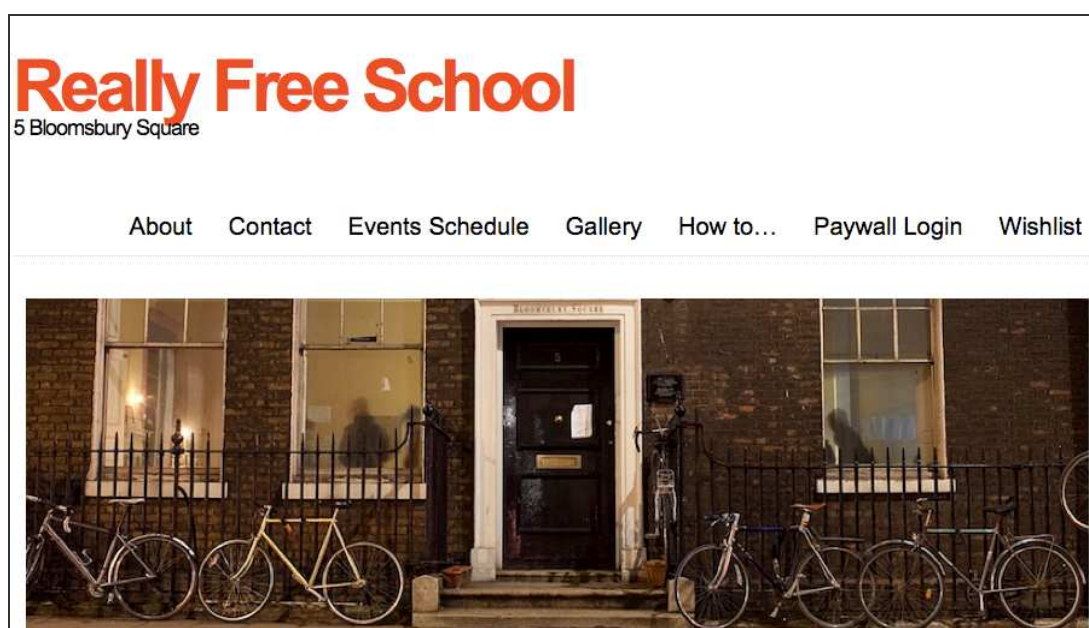


Figure 3.16 Screenshot of the Really Free School blog, Reallyfreeschool.org [accessed 2nd February 2011].

To undermine the squatters' claims, *The Sunday Telegraph* drew extensively on the collective's description by the art dealer and owner of a listed building in Bloomsbury that they occupied:

It was all very middle class. They were intelligent students, certainly not impoverished. They had the selfishness of youth. It simply never occurred to them that the reason there was space for them to occupy in central London is because someone somewhere had worked very hard to pay for it.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Jamieson, A. and B. Leach 2011: The middle class serial squatters exploiting the law. *The Sunday Telegraph*, 6th March 2011.

¹³⁹ Source: Reallyfreeschool.org *Communique #1* January 2011 [accessed 2nd February 2011].

¹⁴⁰ Jamieson and Leach, The middle class serial squatters; see also Leach, B. 2011: Squatters with law on their side. We would never dream of doing this at home, say migrants who have delayed school's expansion. *The Sunday Telegraph*, 13th March 2011; Whitehead, T. 2011: Squatters to face jail as Clarke toughens law. *The Daily Telegraph*, 18th March 2011; Letter to the editor: Upper-class squatters. *The Sunday Telegraph*, 20th March 2011.

The stress on the squatters' youth and their alleged middle-class status was instrumental to the dismissal of any political claim as nothing more than selfish lifestyle posing, with no connection to material needs such as affordable housing.

The Telegraph's media campaign intensified towards the middle of March 2011, and culminated on the 20th March when the paper declared 'Victory against the squatters' and published a letter by the then Minister of State for Housing and Local Government Grant Shapps, stating: "We understand the strength of public feeling about this, and are taking steps to lock the door to squatters for good".¹⁴¹ The paper announced the beginning of works for a parliamentary bill criminalising squatting in residential properties in England.¹⁴² As the consultation for the bill began in July 2011, housing activists launched the SQUASH (SQuatters Action for Secure Homes) campaign, which actively deconstructed the "sensationalist media hysteria surrounding the practice of squatting".¹⁴³ In a Comment is Free article published on *The Guardian's* website, geographer Alex Vasudevan analysed the connection between this proposed bill and the impending reforms of housing and work benefit policies proposed under the 'austerity measures' of the Coalition government. In his argument, Vasudevan suggested that the legislation was aimed not just at squatters but also, more importantly, at other forms of student and housing activism, and should therefore be considered a direct attack on vulnerable communities' 'right to the city'.¹⁴⁴

Ambiguous overlaps and divergences

The discourse of 'good' and 'bad' squatting and its ambiguous association with creativity and entrepreneurship, informed in very different ways the positions and rationales of temporary reuse intermediaries. As already discussed in relation to RIBA'S event 'A flourish of Meanwhiles', representatives the Space Makers Agency often referred to the group's connection with urban squatting. In fact, while the

¹⁴¹ Howie, M. 2011. Victory against the squatters. In *The Sunday Telegraph*, 20th March 2011.

¹⁴² This eventually become Clause 145 of the *Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act*, which was approved in 2012 and entered into effect on the 1st September 2012.

¹⁴³ See also Vasudevan, A. 2011: Legal activism: the spatial politics of squatting in the UK. In *Shift Magazine*. See also several essays and articles published on the SQUASH: the Squatters' Action for Secure Homes campaign group, <http://www.squashcampaign.org/blog/> [accessed 25th September 2011].

¹⁴⁴ Vasudevan, A. 2011: Criminalising squatting would threaten our rights. *The Guardian*, 22nd June 2011.

Really Free School collective was vehemently attacked by the media, Space Makers Agency's Dougald Hine publicly supported their project by promoting them on social media and by giving a public talk titled 'Third Places, Web 2.0 and First Life' in the collective's first squatted premises.¹⁴⁵ Other intermediaries have taken a more cautious stance in relation to the long-term tradition of squatting, drawing on the mid-2000s imaginary of the creative 'good squatter', while asserting the prominence of the right to private property. As explained by one of the founders of Meanwhile Space:

We don't want Meanwhile to become associated with squatting in any way [...] sometimes we have sympathy for [squatters], there's genuinely empty space going to waste and they try to approach it [...] So for that, at times I do have some sympathy for why they have chosen to squat it. Especially those that... I mean, there are two types of squatters: the responsible squatters, who want to create somewhere to live and have a positive impact on spaces, and they are the ones that we can work with, and then there's people who just want free space and, you know, are destructive and... you know, we don't want anything to do with them. But sometimes there are people who go: 'actually I didn't realise we could have approached this legally!'¹⁴⁶

The reflection was concluded with the argument that Meanwhile Space "are achieving similar things as squatters, but in a way that benefits all parties" and that while there can be overlaps in the approaches deployed by squatters and by 'pop-up people', in the last instance "there should be a meanwhile use as opposed to squatting".¹⁴⁷ With a similar approach to the scarcity of space and to 'wasted' vacant sites in London, the potential discursive overlap is shared not only by intermediaries, but also, at times by young squatters involved in more political practices.

When Meanwhile Space opened its pop-up shop on Whitechapel High Street, in Tower Hamlets, in January 2011, for instance, the space rapidly became popular among a varied range of local practitioners and activists, and attracted a considerable amount of interest from individuals, some of whom belonged to the thriving activist

¹⁴⁵ The talk focused on the importance of autonomous spaces of encounters for the establishment of new forms of social relations and conviviality. From the Really Free School website [now archived] 'Dougald Hine: Third Places, Web 2.0 and First Life' talk on 10th February 2011.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Meanwhile Space CIC founders, 1st July 2011.

scene which had developed in East London around a series of collectively owned and squatted social centres.¹⁴⁸



Figure 3.17 Screenshot of photos of the Meanwhile Whitechapel pop-up shop. *Source:* Meanwhile Ning Forum, 19th April 2011.

Ann, a young activist involved in a squatted shop front called Well Furnished, in the nearby borough of Hackney, mentioned her puzzlement at the politics of the pop-up shop. In March 2011, she visited the space to attend the screening of Agnes Varda's *The gleaners and I* (2000) and the launch of the book *FREE: Adventures on the margins of a wasteful society* (2010), a controversial ethnography of squatting in London undertaken by undercover journalist Katharine Hibbert. According to the Meanwhile Space managers, Hibbert was a regular user of the Meanwhile Whitechapel pop-up shop.¹⁴⁹

Ann commented that she found the place 'ambiguous' and that she was surprised and angry that a group campaigning against wasted spaces would charge five pounds to attend the launch of a book about squatting and the screening of a

¹⁴⁸ From the mid 2000s these included RampArt, Freedom Bookstore, the London Action Resource Center, Non-Commercial House and 195 Mare Street, just to name a few.

¹⁴⁹ Hibbert had spent a year squatting and volunteering in squatters' rights organisations, subsequent to which she set out to found Dot Dot Dot Properties, a Community Interest Company heralded as a 'more ethical' anti-squat company. This story prompted the historic London Advisory Service for Squatters to publish on the front page of their website the following disclaimer: "ASS does not support any anti-squat company! Unfortunately someone who used to be in ASS has proved to be a turncoat and has betrayed squatting by starting an anti-squat (property guardian company). ASS condemns this outfit 'dotdotdot property' and its director Kath Hibbert along with ALL other anti squat companies. We do not think any of them are 'ethical'. *Source:* <http://www.squatter.org.uk/> [accessed 15th March 2012]. Although many in the squatting scene criticised Katherine Hibbert after she published her book, other squatters like Ann did not condemn her in the same way, and perceived the book as positively advocating squatting, 'skipping' and the reuse of wasted spaces.

documentary about direct action in relation to food waste in contemporary France.¹⁵⁰ The connection between the framing, a vacant shop front temporarily reclaimed for community uses, and the content of the event re-affirmed discursive positions that partially overlapped with the politics of a squatted shop-front. At the same time, the fact that the space organisers charged for the event appeared as an indicator of the inherent contradictions between the liberal celebration of reuse and its political implications. The practice of reclaiming and reusing waste (spaces, food, materials) is a critique of consumption as much as of capitalist dynamics of enforced scarcity and forbidden abundance. In Ann's account, it is clear that a community-oriented pop-up shop such as the Meanwhile Whitechapel was not immediately 'read' by members of the squatted and social centres community as antithetical to their practices of 'freeconomy', but that at a closer inspection it raised confusion.¹⁵¹

The squat to which Ann belonged, Well Furnished, was one of a series of vacant shop-fronts across inner London squatted and reused as temporary social centres between 2009 and 2011. As will be analysed in more detail in the following chapters, the choice of running a radical social centre in a shop is often driven by a desire to engage with the general public, and the collectives that occupy shop fronts are thus acutely aware of the importance of their self-representation to the outside. Such spaces often make their presence visible through signs in the window, leafleting local traders and residents, keeping blogs and generally widely publicising their activities and their intentions. Their self-representation can be critically compared to the 'temporary use' aesthetics of legal temporary shops such as Meanwhile Space and the Space Makers Agency. This can be observed in the image chosen to represent Non Commercial House, a squatted shop front at 165 Commercial Street, in Whitechapel, in use between July 2009 and February 2010¹⁵² on its *Indymedia* page [fig. 3.18].

¹⁵⁰ The screening took place on the 22nd March 2011, see:

<http://forum.meanwhitespace.com/events/the-gleaners-and-i-introduced> [accessed 29th April 2011].

¹⁵¹ The term 'freeconomy' is used by squatters and activists to refer to activities of recycling and making use of wasted resources such as food or discarded objects. In the UK there are regular events and festivals organised by 'freeconomy' communities, see for instance <http://forum.justforthe loveofit.org/> [accessed 11th November 2012].

¹⁵² In mid 2009, Non Commercial House had reclaimed a vacant shop front in Commercial Street (Whitechapel) to run a one-off 'free school' weekend to provide legal advice for squatters. This is a service that is also regularly offered by other radical spaces across London, such as the ASS (Advisory Service for Squatters) based at the Freedom Bookshop in Whitechapel; and the 56a Infoshop in Elephant and Castle. According to a volunteer, after the weekend one of the participants proposed to keep the place open on a more long-term basis as a *freeshop*, based on the experience of a



Figure 3.18 Non Commercial House. Source: Non Commercial House page on *London Indymedia*, 28th January 2010 [accessed 15th February 2012].

In an *Indymedia* post, a volunteer called Maxigas described the ‘approachability’ of Non Commercial House as aesthetically “very different from the grimy punk attitude that pervades some other activist spaces”.¹⁵³ To demonstrate the openness of the space the article describes that on an average day the shop could be visited by “suits, homeless people, kids with skateboards, some neighbours and precarious (temporary) workers from the corner, an illustrator, a backpacker, and many others”.¹⁵⁴ Well Furnished, which opened about a year after the eviction of Non Commercial House, used a similar aesthetic, both in its presentation to the street

similar space that he had witnessed in Budapest, Hungary. The first period ran between early July 2009 and their first eviction on 30th November 2009; the second from the middle of January 2010 to its final eviction in early February 2010. See also the blog entry: Non Commercial House is gone again, *Indymedia London*, 9th February 2009 [accessed 10th Jan 2012].

¹⁵³ Maxigas 2009: Another Buy Nothing Day at the Freeshop. *Indymedia London*, 1st December 2009, <http://london.indymedia.org/articles/3236> [accessed 12th March 2011].

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. The openness was not without frictions. Another volunteer reported that on one occasion a young man fashionably dressed had stopped in front of the shop and commented casually to his companions ‘and this is our local squat, isn’t it cool?’ Due to the free bike workshops and the vicinity to the popular art and nightlife Shoreditch neighbourhood, in the last weeks of the space there were reported moments of tensions when ‘hipsters’ were not welcomed into the space or were asked to leave. Diary entry about a conversation with a former member of the Non Commercial House collective, 14th April 2012.

and in its self-representation on its blog. The photo [fig. 3.19] shows a see-through curtain, several signs on the front door and a board leaning against the window with a list of the day's activities.



Figure 3.19 Well Furnished, screenshot from Well Furnished blog, <http://wellfurnished.wordpress.com> [accessed 13th July 2012].

The blurb that accompanies the image and that was reproduced on the collective's leaflets is an open invitation to participate in the activities of the space, and describes it as:

a free community space and cultural centre, here in Homerton, London. We are a collective, who really do hate seeing empty buildings such as these go to waste, & believe that...!!!Housing is a Human Right!!! We have organized & cleaned & prepared the ample space available here, to allow for creativity & social gatherings to flow – though we need your help to do it!¹⁵⁵

The claim to reuse empty buildings for community and cultural activities, and the open invite to use it for 'creativity and social gatherings', actively counters the imaginary of squats as counter-cultural spaces by taking on a more 'community

¹⁵⁵ Diary entries on the 11th, 19th and 22nd May 2011.

centre' aesthetic. A crucial difference between this description and those deployed by legalised forms of temporary shop-front reuse, however, is the connection between the reuse of empty buildings going to waste and squatting as a form of housing direct action. The space is defined as both a centre for social and creative activities, and as a home for the members of the collective: its reuse is not a lifestyle choice but grounded in a vocalised right to spatial re-appropriation.

An even more direct engagement with the myth of a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' squatters was offered by a sign in the window of the OffMarket the name of two vacant shop fronts occupied between January and July 2011 on Lower Clapton Road, Hackney, and run as community-oriented freeshops and social spaces [fig. 3.20].¹⁵⁶

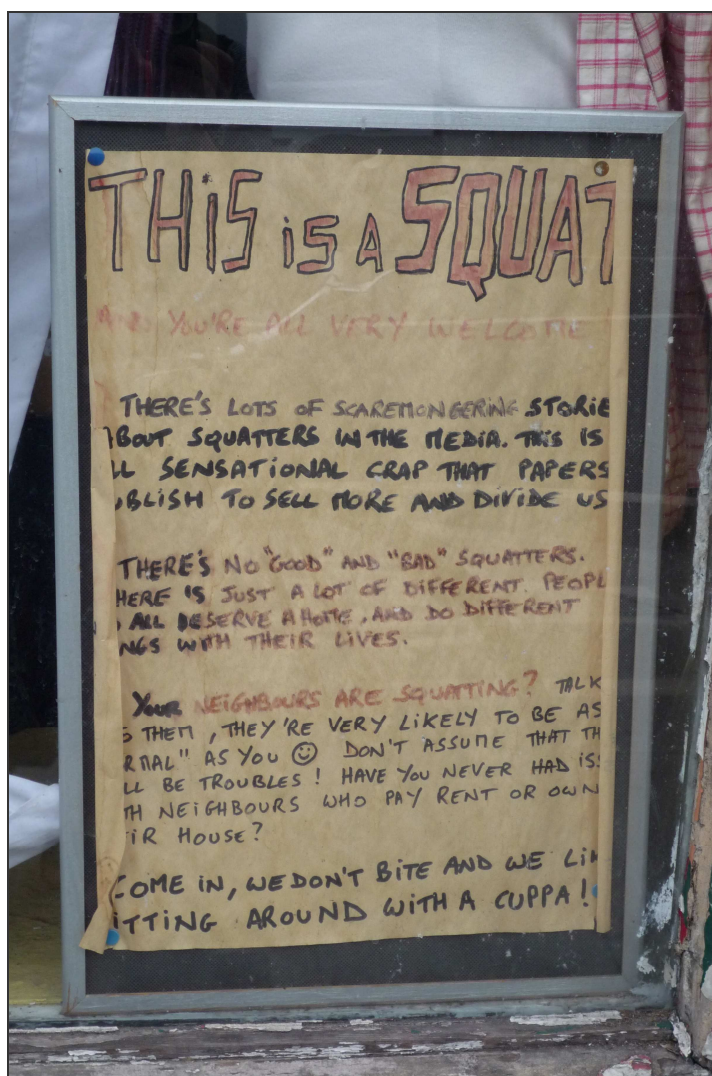


Figure 3.20 OffMarket collective's take on the myth of 'good' and 'bad' squatters. *Source:* personal photograph, May 2011.

¹⁵⁶ The experience of the OffMarket will be discussed in more detail in the following two chapters.

The text on the board read:

This is a squat and you are all very welcome!

There is a lot of scaremongering stories about squatters in the media. This is all sensational crap that papers publish to sell more and divide us.

There is no “good” and “bad” squatters. There is just a lot of different people who all deserve a home, and do different things with their lives.

Your neighbours are squatting? Talk to them, they are very likely to be as “normal” as you ☺. Don’t assume that they’ll be trouble! Have you never had issues with neighbours who pay rent or own their house?

Come in, we don’t bite and we like sitting around with a cuppa!!

The text on the board addresses media representations in their performative role of ‘scaremongers’ and points to the divisive effects of the myth of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ squatters. Similarly to the Well Furnished’s introductory text, the OffMarket sign describes the occupation of the shop front as re-claiming spaces for housing and for ‘doing different things’ with one’s life. It invites people to become familiar with squatters living in their own area and with the space, humorously addressing in a direct way the potential fears associated with squatters seen as ‘trouble’. The performative dimension of such public statements, and the ways in which they may encourage dialogue with local communities beyond the activist scene will be analysed in further detail in Chapter 5 through ethnographic accounts of encounters in the OffMarket shop front.

In the conflictive discursive field of temporary reuse, such statements can be seen to serve the purpose of disrupting the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ distinction, stressing on the contrary the radical dimension of squatting as a form of direct housing. At the same time, references to mainstream negative imaginaries try to encourage dialogue with individuals outside the activist and countercultural scene, and to promote a narrative of normalcy about spatial occupation. In the complex position-takings around temporarily reclaiming vacant shops, the self-representation of squats and social centres can thus be seen as a site of political articulation of the radical potential of an open-to-all prefigurative politics of spatial re-appropriation.

Temporary vacant space reuse as a contested signifier

As explored in this chapter, the discursive field of temporary practices in

vacant spaces is complex, contradictory and at times elusive of clear and definite positions. In order to outline the range of positions and sites from which different contested narratives are produced, in the first part of this chapter, I have analysed the ways in which temporary vacant space reuse is represented and narrated in the 'official narrative' of government's policies, the media and intermediary agencies. In the second, I attended to the ways in which such narratives are interpreted, translated and contested by practitioners and other actors on the ground. In doing so, I have showed shifts, slippages and unlikely alliances across a spectrum of practices and political positions. Narratives of self-representations and promotions intersected each other and delineated a composite discursive territory, where values and meanings are struggled over. In order to understand the cultural politics of the temporary urban reuse, it has been crucial to attend to and analyse the fluidity and ambiguity of the visual, oral and written languages deployed to represent practices of temporary occupation. By paying attention to the discourse of temporary reuse as an emerging and dynamic field of position-takings, I have shown how terms such as 'pop-up shops' and 'meanwhile use' function as ambiguous signifiers that are filled, in different situations, with different discourses and narratives.

The 'official' narrative of temporary reuse hinged on a combination of 'creative cities' discourses and policies, and a new urgency to provide visual fixes to the effects of the recession on negative perceptions and experiences of urban spaces. Underneath the discourse of creative and community uses, lies a strong need to mimic economic activity through symbolic public occupations that produce a sense of 'vibrancy' and activation, whose public performative dimension will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. With regards to the production of a 'script' for urban practitioners, the narratives promoted by intermediaries and the media have drawn on cultural references that associate derelict urban spaces with creativity, art and community projects, but also with slightly illicit countercultural urban imaginaries. As discussed in Chapter 1, the imaginary of creativity amidst urban decay has become a trope of Western urban cultures and countercultures, which has created fertile grounds for identification and participation in projects of reuse by different individuals and groups as career artists, social entrepreneurs and community art practitioners.

In my exploration of the narratives produced by practitioners on the ground, I have identified several sites of critique concerned with a range of highly political

urban cultural issues. Within the framework of Hackney Council's discourse of 'Art in Empty Spaces', the £100 Shop project brought to the public a highly sophisticated critique of symbolic shop reuse and its role within dynamics of art-led gentrification. This intervention addressed the cultural framing of individual projects of reuse in areas of London undergoing rapid urban development, an issue that will be explored and discussed in more detail in the following chapters. As the official discourse mobilised community-oriented activities as a preferred filler for vacant shop-fronts, I also attended to the conflictive experiences of art practitioners trying to engage with local populations. The practitioners' frustrations with the language of their audiences, who may dismiss them as inconsequential 'pop-up' exhibitions, and of commissioning bodies and real estate agencies, revealed their struggle to position themselves within the field and to effectively translate their rationales into forms of self-representation.

Lastly I have addressed notions of temporary vacant space reuse through the ways in which intermediaries and practitioners relate them to past and existing traditions of squatted spaces. At the heart of the discourse of temporary reuse is an argument for looking at vacant spaces as wasted resources, and a claim that it is better to use empty spaces, even temporarily, than to let them lie empty. It is therefore not surprising that in the complex discursive positioning of intermediaries and practitioners, squatting is an explicit cultural point of reference, as I showed and analysed. However, while for squatters the argument for reuse is based on a privileging of use value over and against exchange value, in the official narrative of intermediaries the temporal limit of use coincides with an affirmation of the legal right to private property, above and beyond certain circumscribed professed sympathies for the squatting scene.¹⁵⁷ This fundamental contradiction is not directly legible by users and visitors who encounter the official public discourse of empty space reuse, particularly as the stress on terms such as short-term, meanwhile, interim and temporary acts as an indicator of the exceptional nature of these spaces in relation to existing dynamics of real estate redevelopment. Expanded to the burgeoning discourses of temporary urbanism, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, critics have lamented the ways in which temporary projects of reuse "raise the idea

¹⁵⁷ As discussed in Chapter 1, the claim to use value is central to the notion of the 'Right to the City' as a right to spatial appropriation in a direct challenge to capitalist forms of urbanisation and spatial management.

of an architecture of protest but fail to see it through”¹⁵⁸ by operating within the limits of neoliberal urban development agendas.

When viewed from the angle of the pre-emptive foreclosure of potentially longer term forms of use value and appropriation of space for non-commercial uses, ‘official’ temporary practices of vacant space reuse can be seen as essentially cosmetic and conservative interventions that reinforce neoliberal urban development logics and discourses. It is therefore unsurprising to observe the fast policy transfer of ideas of temporary shop front reuse from fringe urban practices to policy-making, to private companies and profit-making enterprises, and across the political spectrum from New Labour to the Coalition government. It is also unsurprising that cultures of urban squatting are only mentioned after their radical critique of the commodification of space is neutralised through the promotion of the myth of the ‘good’ middle-class creative squatter, which fundamentally pre-empts any connection between spatial appropriation and movements for urban social justice. As discussed further in the course of this thesis, this is a particularly crucial issue for political analysis, as the mainstreaming of non-commercial pop-up and temporary reuse coincided with a revanchist urban agenda that achieved, for the first time in English history, to criminalise squatting in residential properties.

Traversed by such diverse and conflictive narratives, the idea of temporary vacant space reuse may thus be seen as an ‘empty signifier’ filled with different discursive formations depending on the struggles and negotiations over its meaning both in public statements and in the more intimate space of personal conversations.¹⁵⁹ Part of the seduction of temporary use lies in its openness of references and its critical potentiality as a site of urban action and critique. The reuse of vacant shop fronts can therefore be seen as inhabited by radically opposite intents and narratives, and can be mobilised by practitioners strategically to negotiate access, as discussed in relation to the experience of Group+Work. How do these contradictory narratives play out in the material everyday practices of shop front

¹⁵⁸ Abrahams, T. 2012: Review: The Temporary City by Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams. *The Architects' Journal*, 22nd March 2012, <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/culture/-the-temporary-city-by-peter-bishop-and-lesley-williams/8628139.article> [accessed 20th June 2012].

¹⁵⁹ The notion of empty signifier is deployed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau to analyse the constitution of semi-fixed meanings within a field of negotiated discursive formations. See Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. 1985/2001: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso. See also Ernesto Laclau’s essay ‘Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?’, published in E. Laclau 1996: *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso, pp. 36-46.

reuse? How do they inform practitioners' understanding of their own experiences? To answer these questions it is important to address in detail the materialities of accessing and reusing vacant shops in inner London.

In the following chapters, the potentials and limitations of temporary shop front reuse will be interrogated through an in-depth engagement with the experiences of four practices, as outlined in Chapter 2: the Centre for Possible Studies, Studio at the Elephant, the OffMarket, and Make-Do, a pop-up shop facilitated by Meanwhile Space. Drawing on the in-depth analysis of these four projects, in Chapter 4 I will explore and analyse the everyday experience of reuse, paying attention to practitioners' reflexivity and questioning of the relationship between public representations and practice. This will demand focusing on project-specific spatial conditions of reuse: the availability and access to vacant shops, the labour and organisation required to manage them on a day-to-day basis and the formal and informal economies that sustain them. Moving from the analysis of specific practices, I will address the issues raised in Chapter 1 in relation to urban connectivity, flexible and precarious labour, and the material connection between reusing vacant spaces and gentrification dynamics. By addressing crucial differences as well as practical and discursive similarities across a range of projects from institutional to squatted, I will identify shared issues and concerns for understanding temporary shop-front reuse as a form of urban action.

Chapter 4

What goes unsaid: re-materialising temporary shop reuse

Access, economies, labour and connecting with ‘the community’

“provided you beg, borrow or steal a space”¹

In the previous chapter the discourse of temporary vacant shop reuse has been explored as a field of position-takings and narratives articulated from and through a range of sites and practices, from official policy-making to the self-representation of community-oriented art practices and grass-root squatted social centres. Local authorities’ schemes, media campaigns and intermediary organisations have been shown to play important roles in the circulation of an official discourse of reuse, and practitioners’ accounts on the ground have been analysed to address the articulation and circulation of critical and compliant narratives of urban reuse. This chapter will build on practitioners’ reflections by carrying out a situated critical materialist analysis of the conditions and arrangements of experiences of vacant shop reuse in contemporary inner London. In order to ‘re-materialise’ the discourse of temporary reuse, I will pay attention to what goes unsaid about the material conditions of reuse, particularly in relation to the urban dynamics causing retail vacancy, the allegedly alternative ‘civic economies’, the reliance on unpaid and voluntary labour, and the assumptions underpinning the community focus of temporary projects.

First of all, the official explanation for the recent proliferation of temporary reuse is grounded in an imaginary of urban recession that assimilates all empty shops and neglects the specific reasons and histories underlying their vacancy. The creation of an exportable national urban policy of pop-up shop schemes explored in the previous chapter embodies this homogenising conceptual gesture, and proposes a solution to be replicated across very different socio-economic contexts. As already discussed in relation to the experiences of Group+Work in the Borough of Westminster and of the £100 Shop in the Borough of Hackney, despite the official narrative, accessing rent-free spaces for critical and non-commercial community-oriented use can be very difficult and is reliant upon ad-hoc negotiations with property owners and managers. How do practices of temporary reuse originate?

¹ Millar, B. 2009: Do it yourself: pop-up galleries. *The Art Newspaper/Frieze Art Fair Daily*, p. 5.

What are the urban conditions that produce empty shop fronts and their reuse? And what do they tell us about specific local and citywide dynamics? By analysing the ways in which practitioners research and negotiate access to vacant shops, and their relationship to local authorities and property owners' agendas, this chapter will attempt to address the question of the connection between temporary reuse and dynamics of urban gentrification and place marketing raised in Chapter 1.

The second issue to be considered when re-materialising the discourse of temporary use is economic and will be addressed through an attention to the practicalities of specific projects. Non-commercial temporary shops are sometimes presented as subverting existing economic dynamics by offering free spaces to people and projects that would have not been able to access them through the rental market. While successful negotiations and direct action can lead to rent-free use of the space, it does not follow that the use of the space will be 'free'. How are practices of reuse sustained? What kinds of formal and informal economies do they mobilise? Vacant retail sites often require extensive initial work to make the space accessible, and to maintain its openness to the public, and self-organised projects are often unable or unwilling to fundraise to cover the cost of equipment, of materials and, importantly, of their own labour. As discussed in Chapter 3, the practitioners' ability to mobilise existing local resources in the form of monetary, non-monetary and in-kind support is crucial to the conceptualisation of temporary reuse as alternative and autonomous from existing economic dynamics.

In the self-representation of artistic pop-up reuse, the economic dimension is often overlooked since claims to disinterestedness support ideas of artistic independence from mainstream power and economic relations. As famously put by Pierre Bourdieu, the production of value in the cultural field functions as a reversal of 'ordinary' economic logic, a "generalised game of 'loser wins' where self-reliance and poverty are a sign of commitment and passion."² For activists running autonomous spaces, on the contrary, economic self-sufficiency is presented as a successful form of direct action; yet, unspoken assumptions often underlie their visible 'free' economies. Attending to the combination of diverse economies mobilised by practitioners and activists, and their relationship to 'mainstream' economic relations, it will be possible to explore critically the complex economic

² Bourdieu, P. 1993: *The field of cultural production: essays on art and literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 39.

geographies of temporary urban reuse, and the extent to which they offer alternative strategies to market dynamics.

The third issue, following from the question of diverse economies, is a need to examine the types of work that enable temporary shops to exist, and the demands on participants and volunteers, particularly in the cultural sector.³ The official narrative of connecting ‘people and places’ assumes the existence of networks of participants readily available on a voluntary basis and at a short notice. Such an assumption does not address the exclusivity of such a recruitment strategy, nor the unspoken dynamics of ‘work-for-labour’, which often informs flexible-labour in the cultural and not-for-profit sectors, through which voluntary labour becomes necessary in order to obtain paid commissions and work in the future.⁴ What kinds of labour do temporary practices of vacant shop reuse require? Which formal and informal networks and institutions do they draw upon? Analysing forms of labour, participation and the longer temporalities that precede temporary projects will enable me to address critically the disembodied imaginary of communities of practitioners materialising overnight to ‘fill’ an empty space. Drawing attention to the invisible labour of preparation and coordination will offer insights into the relationship between temporary space reuse and wider dynamics of precarious labour.

Lastly, I will address the question of organising and facilitating the engagement of community users and audiences. As outlined in Chapter 2 in my methodological discussion, this and the following chapters focus on practices of reuse that claim explicitly to create a platform for local communities. In Chapters 1 and 3 I have indicated that there is a strong connection between practices of vacant space reuse and public-facing cultural and activist activities. In contemporary art the inclusion of process-based and community-oriented art practices has meant that

³ See Neilson, B. and Rossiter, N. 2008: Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception. *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, pp. 51-72.

⁴ According to labour sociologist Guy Standing, in order “to function well in a tertiary flexible-labour society, much time must be used in ‘work-for-labour’, work that does not have exchange value but which is necessary or advisable” to guarantee current and future employment. ‘Work-for-labour’ can take various forms, including constant training and re-skilling, relentless networking outside working hours and the ability to pursue “information gathering to maintain familiarity with current thinking on a range of subjects”, see Standing, G. 2011: *The precariat: the new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 120-122. Empirical research on the cultural and creative sectors in contemporary Britain since the mid 1990s has shown ‘work-for-labour’ is widespread in the labour experience of young as well as more established cultural practitioners, especially in London. See for instance McRobbie, A. 2009: Reflections on Precarious Work in the Cultural Sector. In Lange, B., Stober, B. and Wellmann, I. (eds) *Governance der Kreativwirtschaft: Diagnosen und Handlungsoptionen*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, pp. 123-139.

artists have reclaimed as legitimate artistic forms processes that involve working with people.⁵ In Grant Kester's definition, the main difference between conventional art practices and socially-engaged art is the replacement of a "conventional, 'banking' style of art [...] in which the artist deposits an expressive content into a physical object, to be withdrawn later by the viewer – with a process of dialogue and collaboration."⁶ Establishing dialogue and collaboration with participants outside the art field is, however, a complex process, and many critics have debated the limitations and political implications of participatory artistic forms.⁷

Among theorists of socially-engaged art practices, Kester has offered a critical examination of the complex power relations engendered through forms of openness to a 'community', especially as the term has been customarily used to refer to disenfranchised and poorer urban inhabitants, the "segments of the public that were often alienated from the institutions of high art"⁸ and from other spaces of civil society. Such an understanding of 'community' evidently implies preconceived ideas about certain urban populations as in need of intervention, which predate practitioners' encounters and engagement with the multiple and intersecting groups and individuals living and working in an urban locale, and a similar critique could equally be moved to activists. In order to examine the relationship between artists and activists and the idea of 'community' in community-oriented temporary practices, therefore, one "must begin with the vexing question of how to define community itself".⁹ In this chapter I explore and analyse the rationales of practitioners and activists for undertaking temporary projects in order to examine implicit and explicit understandings and assumptions about places and 'local communities'. In my critical attention to the mechanisms and tactics of promotion and inclusion, I will uncover assumptions, conflicts and limitations of pop-up urban connectivity, and address the implicit role assigned to community-oriented practitioners, particularly in relation to local discourses of urban regeneration.¹⁰

⁵ For a critical discussion of community-oriented art practices and the complex implications of working 'with' people see Kester, G. H. 2004: *Conversation pieces: community and communication in modern art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁶ Kester, *Conversation pieces*, p. 10.

⁷ Bishop, C. 2012: *Artificial Hells. Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. London: Verso.

⁸ Ibid., p. 126.

⁹ Ibid., p. 129. See also footnote 15 p. 220.

¹⁰ See Berry Slater, J. and Iles, A. 2009: *No room to move: radical art and the regenerated city*. London: Mute Magazine.

In writing this chapter I have attempted to interweave a critical reflection on the material conditions of temporary shop reuse in contemporary London with practitioners and activists' voices and reasoning, and the implicit and explicit value judgements expressed in their description of the processes that accompany the development of their projects. The efforts of finding a suitable space, for instance, can prompt learning about patterns of property ownership and management, and about the longer-term tendencies and development plans that cause short-term vacancy. Such a search may also constitute a moment in which practitioners begin to discover the role that official discourses of urban change and regeneration assign to them and their temporary projects as producers of cultural and symbolic capital. Moreover, by encouraging practitioners' critical reflection on their positions and on the voluntary labour required by projects of reuse, I have also attended to the complex expectations of property owners and of practitioners themselves on the volunteers and participants central to their projects.

In order to address these moments of knowledge production and self-reflection, in this chapter I focus on the material conditions of four temporary community-oriented projects in vacant shops in inner London. As outlined in Chapter 2, the four shop front projects were selected based on their form of organisation, their legal dimension, their location and their relationship to existing policy frameworks, in order to highlight similarities and differences across a field of practices. Through practitioners' accounts, I will discuss in detail the development of each project: from the practitioners' rationale and understanding of place, to their strategies for gaining rent-free access, to the economic and labour arrangements that enabled to sustain their practices in the spaces. I will begin with Make-Do, a six-week project in a shop front partly facilitated by Meanwhile Space and by Camden Council's pop-up shop scheme, which will reveal the economic and organisational issues of a 'successful' meanwhile project. Secondly, I will analyse the experience of the institutional and fully funded Centre for Possible Studies and its negotiations to obtain rent-free properties around Edgware Road. Both Make-Do and the Centre for Possible Studies can be seen as examples of institutionally backed forms of temporary shop front reuse and will be contrasted to the self-organised experiences of the community-oriented art project Studio at the Elephant and the autonomous squatted freeshop and social centre OffMarket. While there are undeniable differences between these four projects, by bringing them together through a critical

comparison I attempt to highlight substantial similarities that point to broader questions about urban dynamics and precarity in contemporary London.

Make-Do

Make-Do was a 6-week project of reuse in an empty shop in Somers Town, Camden, between November 2010 and January 2011. The Make-Do collective obtained the rent-free use of a retail property owned by the Council that used to be former launderette, Stephe's Dry Cleaning, at 52 Phoenix Road, in Somers Town through Camden Council's Pop-Up Scheme [fig. 4.1]. As explained in the previous chapter, this scheme was seen as a successful precedent to the Department for Communities and Local Government's pop-up policy [see also figure 3.11] and was strongly informed by strategies of creative industries-led regeneration. The Make-Do collective was initiated by Mariana, a London-based young architecture graduate who had previously worked as a freelance researcher for the Meanwhile Project on its national survey of practices of temporary vacant shop reuse, which provided her with the practical knowledge to set up a pop-up space herself.

When narrating her rationale, Mariana explained that she had become interested in the idea of temporary urban spaces as places "where innovation was going to happen" while studying urban sociology:

[we were looking at] this creative cities idea which says that [a temporary urban space] is the perfect place to just test things out, that was low cost, it was grass-root, it meant that you just worked with whatever you had there [...] creativity [is] produced when there are boundaries, the most interesting things happen where there are constraints. So it's like creating that interesting setting for new things to happen.¹¹

Mariana's explanation, which hints at the role of higher education in promoting Creative Cities' ideas, reproduces the entrepreneurial idea of creativity as born from constraints and of creative innovation as resulting from temporary spaces where it is possible 'to test things out', as opposed to institutions or long-term engagements which are by default seen as non innovative.

¹¹ Conversation with Mariana, 9th August 2011.

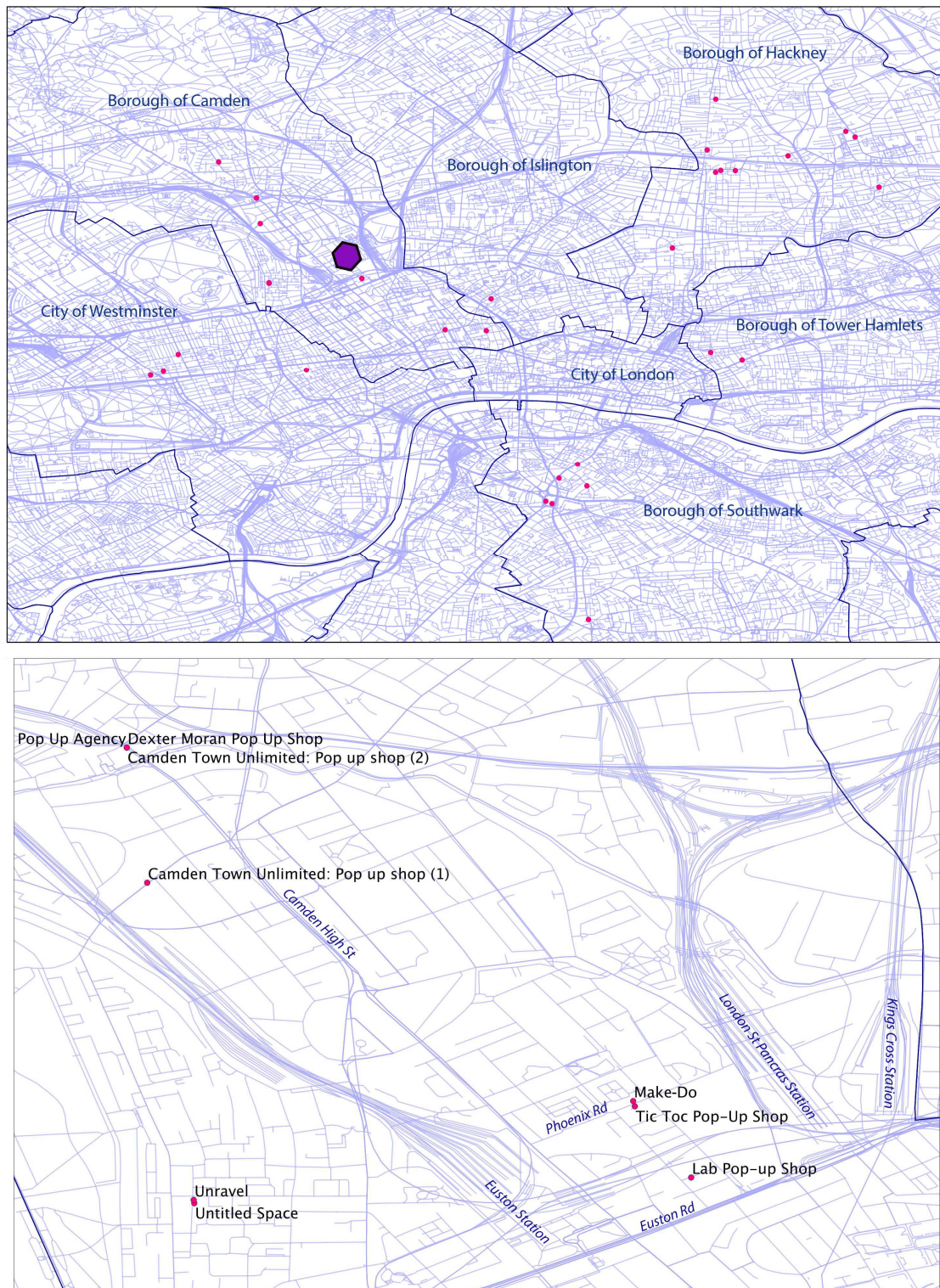


Figure 4.1 Map of Make-Do shop in the context of pop-up shops across inner London (above) and central Camden (below).

The name ‘Make-Do’ reflects this attention to working within given limits, and to the ‘civic economy’ logic of unlocking the potential of community assets discussed in Chapter 3:

We wanted people to [...] use their skills, all their assets that the community already has, that aren't being used to their full potential. So that's people and spaces, and how can we put those together to create new things? So it was also just about making connections.¹²

The idea of bringing together people and places through temporary use is here translated in a simplified connectionist narrative, fitting the Meanwhile discursive framing of temporary reuse. In fact, the project was actively supported and promoted by Meanwhile Space CIC and presented as "very very successful" in terms of the ability of practitioners to connect with the local communities: they "really had very good connections beforehand with the Somers Town community group [...] and were able to really use them when they moved into the space".¹³

In terms of Mariana's relationship to the place and to Camden, when questioned about the choice of Somers Town as the location for her project, she admitted that although the area was not far from where she had lived most of her life, she had first come across it through her studies:

I had studied about [it] and [laugh], I had never heard of it and I live really close to it, and it was a complete ghetto of houses, like social housing, in the middle of the centre of London! And I was like, how is it possible that there's such low social capital, there's young people here who never leave Somers Town, and never go to university, and yet they live next to all these supposed hubs, like, you know, it's supposed to be the information hub, the transport hub, now the creative hub of London, and yet the people on the doorsteps don't... don't have any engagement with that?¹⁴

The designation of the neighbourhood as a 'social housing ghetto' in her explanation reveals an approach to the place as a troubled area for social intervention, visible also in the reference to the 'low social capital' of its youth, and its alleged lack of connection with the national and global fluxes of which the Kings Cross area is supposedly a hub. This pre-existing value judgement about the place and its residents informed the development of the project and her approach to the Somers Town 'community' as 'forgotten' in the heart of the city.¹⁵ Mariana was keen on using the

¹² Ibid. See also NESTA, CUBE and 00:/ 2011: *NESTA 2011 Compendium for the Civic Economy*.

¹³ Interview with founders of the Meanwhile Space CIC, 1st July 2011.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The 2010 Royal Institute of British Architect's competition titled 'Forgotten Spaces' has been discussed in Chapter 3. Mariana had considered submitting a proposal with Jane, a friend and

project and the space to connect young people in Somers Town to those institutions operating and networks intersecting “at its doorsteps” through an exchange platform, as she “thought it would be really interesting if some kind of exchange could happen, mixing the things on the edge of Somers Town with the people inside”.¹⁶ Similarly to the narrative of a social ghetto, her spatial analysis of the area was framed as a problem of connectivity between an allegedly insular and deprived community, at the centre, and the rest of the city ‘on the edge’.

The initial idea, developed with a friend, was to “set up a project where people could share their skills and ideas, and use it for whatever they want it to use it for”.¹⁷ Over spring and early summer 2010 the two organisers, Mariana and Joshua, began a ‘scoping exercise’ to map the formal and informal organisations that operated in the area “to find out what there was, what were the needs”¹⁸ since they felt that they couldn’t “just come in from outside and decide for them, because then they won’t get involved”.¹⁹ They heard about the Somers Town Community Group and Mariana began attending their local meetings:

I explained that I was thinking about doing a project in the area [...] We didn’t want to raise expectations and say that we had a shop, but we wanted to find out where the interest was [and] meet the people [...] People in that area seemed hostile to people from outside wanting to do stuff and, kind of suspicious, but because we presented it as ‘this is a space for you, and we are just facilitating what happens in it, and setting it up’, they liked that. And this guy in the community, who’s always complaining – I have been to these meetings, and he complains and complains – and then he’s like ‘oh, it’s nice for a change, for people to ask us what we want, rather than the other way round’.²⁰

The mapping of existing resources and groups was also an important element in their application to the Council’s pop-up scheme to demonstrate engagement and the potential benefits that Make-Do could bring to local community: “in that proposal

colleague from her architecture course, who later became part of the Make-Do collective.
Conversation with Mariana, 17th August 2011.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

we put who we had spoken to in the community, all the contacts that we made [...] how we can get them involved, and then the Council said yes.”²¹

Resources and ‘making do’ without money

Once Camden Council agreed to finding a vacant shop, the organisers applied for funding to support their work in the space from a charity called UnLtd* “which supports social entrepreneurs - people with vision, drive, commitment and passion who want to change the world for the better”.²² The award of up to £25,000 would have allowed them to cover expenses and offer the coordinators of the project a fee, but the application was unsuccessful.²³ The lack of financial support created a small tension between the two organisers. While Joshua was unemployed and “wanted [the project] to be a serious thing that then he could earn a living from”,²⁴ Mariana had a part-time job and was prepared to carry out the project without funding:

Joshua was more concerned with money than I was. I kind of felt like, well, the whole point of the project is about managing with whatever you have got, if we get a shop, you know, we don’t really need any money. But he was very focused, ‘we have to get some funding for this’ [...] I think that’s a real issue, because you shouldn’t, you shouldn’t be so hung by, constrained by money. That’s the whole point, that you should be finding your other assets, finding other creative ways to do things without having [money]. So anyway, [applying for funding] tied us up quite a lot.²⁵

Mariana justifies her stance through an implicit normative conceptual blueprint of what projects of temporary empty space reuse ‘should’ be about. The ‘civic economy’ argument permeates her language: money should not be a constraint because Joshua and she, as project coordinators, were meant to be ‘finding other assets’ and ‘creative ways to do things’ without money, tapping into alternative non-monetised economies.

²¹ Conversation with Mariana, 9th August 2011.

²² See UnLtd webpage <http://www.unltd.org.uk/index.php> [accessed 9th March 2012].

²³ The UnLtd* Level 2 grant awarded up to £15,000. *Source*: *ibid*.

²⁴ Conversation with Mariana, 17th August 2011.

²⁵ Conversation with Mariana, 9th August 2011.

As the negotiations for the shop unit were also delayed, Joshua decided to leave the project and the country:

We were on the cusp of getting [...] this big fund that they had, and Camden Council was supposed to be giving us a shop, and then they were just taking absolute months! And Joshua decided, that's it, I can't wait any longer, I am going to go and live [abroad]! [Laugh] so he left! Yeah, he left!! And I was at the point when, this was supposed to be a summer project, to do over the summer, to try out and then to see what happens, and then it was getting to September, Joshua had left, we had, you know, no money, no shop, I didn't know what to do.²⁶

Mariana's reiteration of the idea of Make-Do as a 'summer project' qualifies her approach to the idea of a pop-up unit as an alternative time-space in her life. Stating what the project was 'supposed to be' reveals her frustration at the realisation that the realities of temporary reuse differed substantially from the idea of immediate and smooth connectivity that she had researched and promoted when working for Meanwhile Space.

Finally in October 2010 the Council contacted her to confirm that they had found a suitable shop in Somers Town, a former launderette that had become vacant. At the same time, UnLtd* decided to grant them a smaller award (£2,200). Mariana was on her own so she brought together a small team of four volunteers from her own personal network: one was her unemployed brother, John, who had experience in youth work; one was the brother of a university colleague, Henry, who was also unemployed; then Henry's flatmate Robert heard about the project and decided to get involved. At that time Robert was employed by an international charity working against children poverty, and was keen to gain direct experience with youth work since his role in the charity was limited to office work. Lastly, Mariana convinced a friend who studied architecture with her, Elizabeth, who had a full time job but whom she felt she could trust because of a long-term shared interest in RIBA's Forgotten Spaces competition.²⁷ The delay in gaining access to the space and the last minute arrangements meant that 'it all happened very quickly':

They hadn't even met each other yet. And then all of a sudden we got the shop. So it was literally like, meeting each other and the shop all at the same

²⁶ Conversation with Mariana, 9th August 2011.

²⁷ Ibid.

time. So that was... quite an important thing because it meant that people didn't know people's styles of working, why they were involved... there was never an opportunity when all of us were together! And so two weeks in, that was really an issue.²⁸

It's important to examine this vignette as revealing many elements of the pop-up mechanism in their temporal precarity, and as challenging the myth of a seamless connection between vacant places and flexible practitioners. Although the unit had been empty for several months prior and the Council had initially told the practitioners that they would gain access between the end of August and the beginning of September, the delay in gaining access considerably shifted the organisational dynamics, as the 'summer project' had to accommodate the temporalities of autumn activities. Joshua's employment situation made the question of funding particularly important, and a central reason to decide whether to commit or not to the project. The uncertainty linked to the lack of funding and to the delay in gaining access to the space was itself problematic for the remaining practitioners, as Mariana struggled to bring together a collective in time for the launch.

Opening and programming

Make-Do volunteers' first activity was to clean the shop and set it up. The Council had cleared away the bulky items in the space, but the Make-Do collective still had to paint the walls and replace the flooring. The physical act of opening up the unit and having young people 'scrubbing away' – in Mariana's words – created an important space of encounter with members of the local communities and local businesses:

The nice thing is that through all the meetings that I had gone to, we got to know a few people in the area, so this guy called Sam who was unemployed, he always wanted to get young people involved in the project, and he helped us a lot, he brought his tools over to the shop, and was helping us take the bars down from the window. He was really great, and he'd just pop by any time he was passing, and ask how we were doing [...] and the guy in the cafe' next door would bring us free teas, and see how we were. People were

²⁸ Conversation with Mariana, 17th August 2011.

curious, started to be like ‘what’s this, you know, this space is open, it’s never been open, what’s going on?’²⁹

The launch of the space was advertised on the project’s blog, on various mailing lists and on Meanwhile Space’s online forum with the following text:

Make-Do is a collective that activates spaces, people and communities in order to stimulate change. We do this by creating temporary platforms for community projects. [...] This space is open to anyone to try out an idea they have for an event, an exhibition, a workshop or any kind of social project. All we ask is that in exchange for using the space you provide some support for other projects happening within the space too. The shop is a short walk from Kings Cross Station and is in the heart of Somers Town.³⁰

The opening night on 22nd November 2010 was meant to be the time when the coordinators would get “ideas for what would happen” in the space.³¹ On the evening, the organisers handed out paper cut-outs in the shape of light bulbs for visitors to write down ideas for the space: workshops, event, connections and screenings. Participants and visitors present on the opening night made 44 proposals, ranging from language exchanges, to local history walks, to craft workshops and political meetings, as documented in the Make-Do archive. In contrast to this wide range of potential activities, however, the final programme reflected only a small part of the proposals.³² According to Mariana, this discrepancy had less to do with a conscious desire to select specific activities, and more with issues of internal organisation and with flaws in the collective’s strategies of communicating and organising with local Somers Town residents. Mariana explained that they had asked

²⁹ Conversation with Mariana, 17th August 2011.

³⁰ From Meanwhile Space NING forum, see <http://meanwhilespace.ning.com/events/52-phoenix-road> [accessed 22nd February 2011].

³¹ Conversation with Mariana, 17th August 2011.

³² The final programme of events, which took place over four weeks, consisted of: a poetry night, a few film screenings, live art drawing classes by two local artists, a Somers Town walk and talk, a clothes swap, a ‘community art exhibition’ run by Untitled Space (more below), a film editing workshops for young people, a live art performance, a community dinner and a few ‘open studios’ with UCL urban studies students. Among what was proposed on the night and that was not included in the programme was: a slow dating event for 58+ only; a language exchange; free women’s health classes; Free legal advice, microfinance facility co-operative, housing/re-settlement advice; a Christmas craft drop in session, where you bring in any crafty activity you want; Indoor Olympics Featuring prestigious event, e.g. tiddlywinks, conkers, rock-paper-scissors, thumb-war, twister; ‘Design on the Breadline’, Drop-in design session with unemployed architects, arts graduates and designers; CHOOPS Organise (Camden Hands Off Our Public Services) – meeting place to organise; a Climate change workshop. *Source:* hand written post-it notes collected during the event, now in the Make-Do archive.

participants to write down their email addresses, and that each member of the collective was meant to take care of the organisation of each event, but the general confusion in following up proposals and being in touch with participants meant that many activities simply did not happen.³³

Another way for people to propose events was through an application form, which was meant to regulate the exchange between using the space and offering time towards other activities. Mariana admitted, however, that it only worked on one occasion, in the case of an artist group called UntitledSpace who proposed an Art Auction³⁴ over two days in the final week of the project (16th-18th December 2010):

One time when it did work really well with the application form, was with this group that I'd met doing something else, an artist group, through another Meanwhile Space's event. And they wanted to trial their idea and needed a space to do it in. It was like an auction, an art auction. So they did their form, and I was like, brilliant! And in exchange they came on a Saturday, one of them, and helped do a kids' art workshop, and they also helped with the flyering. So they went around doing that. [...] That was an example of it working exactly how we wanted.³⁵

The analysis of the programme and the discrepancy between the events that took place 'exactly' as the collective wanted, and the reality of the temporalities of engaging and communicating with local communities, is indicative of fault lines in the claims of Make-Do as a pop-up community urban platform. Mariana explained this through an anecdote:

There was a day centre for homeless people that I had gone to see a couple of times, they really wanted to get involved, you know, we asked them what kind of thing would, would your young people... kind of find useful? Coming into the shop to help us one day a week? You know... because they all needed something, a step before going into employment, something to just keep them going. You know, we said, they could do anything! They could run a market in there.³⁶

From her casual description of their engagement with the homeless day centre she seemed oblivious of the difficulties faced by homeless people, especially young

³³ Conversation with Mariana, 17th August 2011.

³⁴ See <http://untitledspace.co.uk/projects/project-one> [accessed 15th February 2011].

³⁵ Conversation with Mariana, 17th August 2011.

³⁶ Ibid.

individuals, and the different temporalities required to build relations based on trust. Their model of community interaction clearly positioned the organisers as facilitators of exchanges between individuals, with “anybody could come and propose any event, any workshop. We are just helping them to do that”.³⁷ Her frustration with their unsuccessful approaches to the users of the day centre is visible in the way she narrates the episode during one of our conversations, where I couldn’t help challenging her logic:

M: it was impossible, because they kept saying, yes yes yes, and then we were like well, it’s happening now, so where are you? What’s... what you are going to do? And even these artist guys, you know, we encouraged them to go and speak to them... and they went, and they said, ‘yes we want to be involved in the art auction’. And then they went another day, and the guy was like, ‘oh now, that person is not in today, you know, you have to speak to this one’, and then it’s like, the moment has passed, they missed it!

me: but... there are just so many temporalities, and so many things that have different speeds and different velocities, and, well the city in general is very hectic, and that’s, for me this is part of how you connect a pop-up space, even if you don’t want to use the term, but it’s a space that arises and is there very intensively for a very short time... with all the other times and rhythms [...] And I can imagine that if you are in a position where you already don’t feel particular... ownership of your own life, then, being asked to do something at short notice, and liaise, it can just take months...

M: yeah, I agree, but our idea is, this is supposed to be an interruption, a disturbance, and shake up the timings and the rhythm of the place. And... it’s not supposed to fit in, it’s like a festival, you know, the whole point of a festival or a holiday, is that you are breaking from your rituals and your everyday life, to interrupt it, to do something else, and to move in a slightly different, you know, it’s like everything is like this, and then you coming and create a bump in the rhythm. So, some people can jump on board with that, and say yeah, I want, I like this, and other... they let it go past, because they

³⁷ Conversation with Mariana, 17th August 2011.

can't jump on it in time, or.. they don't, you know... they... this group obviously couldn't jump on it in time for various reasons...³⁸

In her impatience it is possible to read a genuine annoyance at not being able to connect people, which the project had set itself to do as a platform. She tried to connect less privileged young people, individuals with 'low social capital' in her own words, with a space and a project coming from that world of global fluxes and higher education at the doorsteps of Somers Town. Notwithstanding her good will and the good will of the artists of Untitled Space, this anecdote shows how the temporariness of the project created clear inequalities of access that contrasted with the discourse of inclusivity used to promote the space. Expectations of participation are based on the alleged ability of everyone to be involved, which showed a naive if not insensitive understanding of different social and economic circumstances. Trying to engage homeless young people at a day centre without a longer-term outreach strategy, without a clear sense of what type of exchange could take place in the temporary space, meant that those individuals were asked to be entrepreneurial. In her words, they needed to be people who could 'jump on board' at short-notice.

Based on her training and upbringing, Mariana's approach to Somers Town was that of an urban professional interested in solving an 'urban issue' through a short-term entrepreneurial intervention. The coordinators approached the population of the area as a community in need, and put forward a proposal to offer a space where some of these needs could be met. But the time and energy required for a thorough engagement with the community was beyond the practitioners' capacity:

It was a lot of hours of going to talk to people in the community beforehand! And to try and get them involved [...] they needed us to literally hold their hand and take them into the shop, a lot of these groups. But we didn't have any more capacity to do that, to see them so much and to give them so much attention, and that was the problem.³⁹

The figurative expression 'to hold their hand and take them into the shop' used by Mariana to explain her frustration points to a significant tension in the claim to openness of Make-Do as a platform for local communities. Grant Kester has called this approach to community involvement "dialogical determinism" as based on "the idea that all social conflicts can be resolved through the utopian power of free and

³⁸ Conversation with Mariana, 17th August 2011.

³⁹ Ibid.

open exchange”.⁴⁰ The claim that a temporary shop could be ‘open to everyone’ by virtue of being physically accessible, clearly overlooked the unequal temporal, cultural and power relations that preconditioned participation. Beside the participation of ‘the community’, moreover, the lack of proper funding, the long delays and the short notice also created barriers to the participation of the core members of the collective, many of whom could not be as involved as Mariana and didn’t want or could not share organisational and administrative tasks. After December Mariana realised that on top of the part-time job she was doing to support herself, she was also working full time to run the space, and this was unsustainable:

I got completely burnt out by the end. And we could have then had the space for January, and I was just... there’s absolutely no way I am doing it. It was such a shame because people were like, oh, we finally know who you are, and what you do in the community, and now we want to get involved, and I was like, well, I am sorry [laugh] I can’t do it! That was really difficult.⁴¹

Despite the Meanwhile Space claim that the project was very successful and had built very strong ties with the community, a detailed analysis of the economies and labour requirements, as well as of the programming and outreach strategies, offers a grounded critique of the Meanwhile discourse of smooth connectivity explored in the previous chapter. I will now turn to another institutionally backed project reusing vacant shop fronts, the Centre for Possible Studies, to analyse its site-specific politics of community outreach and the precariousness of its locations in relation to local narratives and plans for urban regeneration.

The Centre for Possible Studies

The second project of temporary shop reuse under examination, the Centre for Possible Studies, was part of the Serpentine Gallery’s Edgware Road Project, a site-specific arts and education programme in and around the Edgware Road in the West London borough of Westminster. Between summer 2009 and summer 2012, the project took place for varying periods of time in three vacant locations, two of which were vacant shop-fronts: a former hairdresser on Porchester Place, a former

⁴⁰ “Dialogical determinism simply replaces a vulgar Marxist concept of economic determinism with the equally reductive belief that discursive exchange or dialogue has the power, in and of itself, to radically transform social relations”, Kester, *Conversation pieces*, p. 182.

⁴¹ Conversation with Mariana, 9th August 2011.

restaurant on Seymour Street and a three storey residential building on Gloucester Place [fig. 4.2].

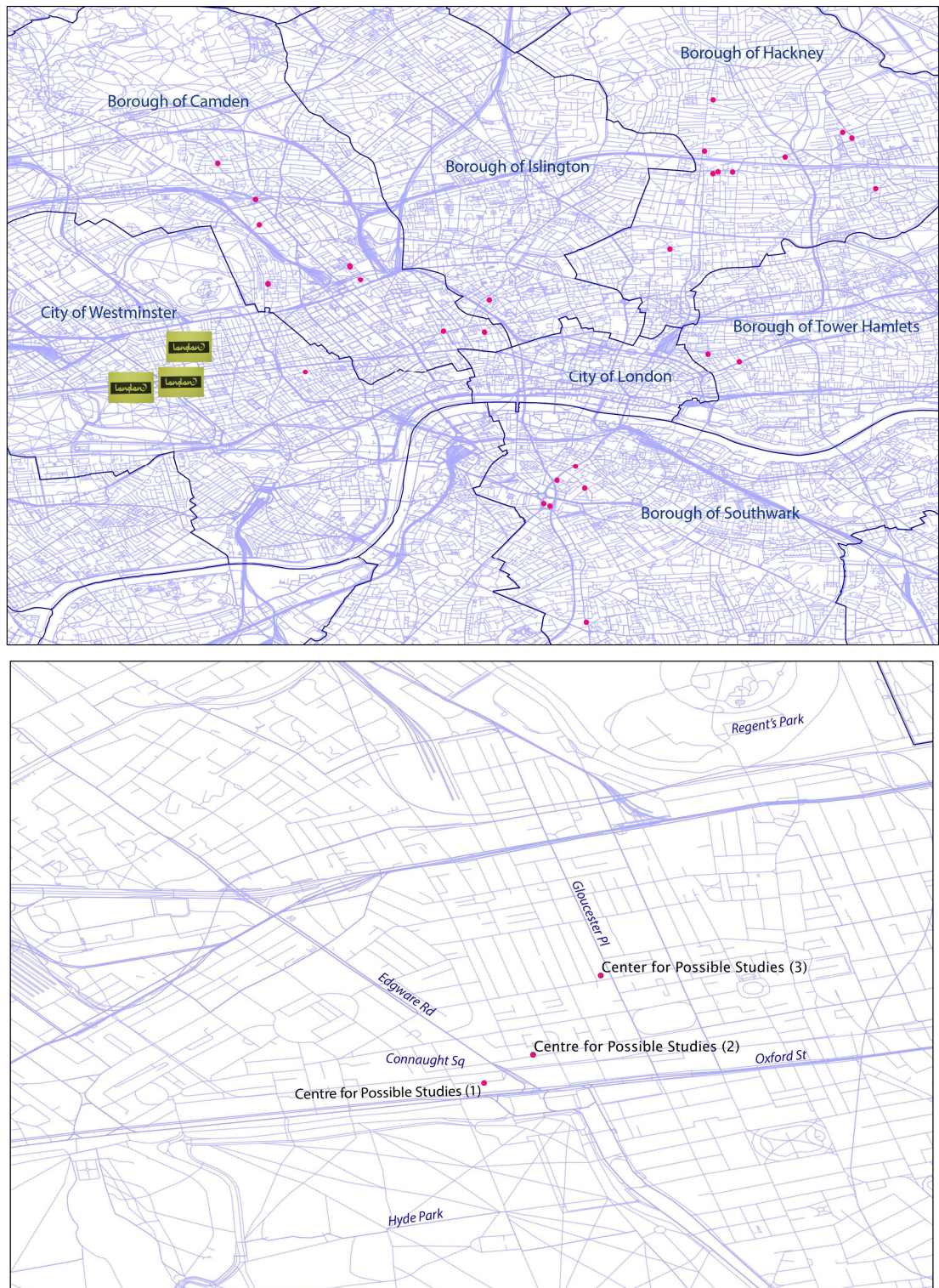


Figure 4.2 Map of the Centre for Possible Studies sites in the context of pop-up shops across inner London (above) and in relation to Edgware Road (below).

The geographical proximity of two of the most important contemporary art galleries in London provided the basis for intense and more experimental arts

programming in the neighbourhood.⁴² The end of the Dis-assembly project was described as ‘traumatic’ for the coordinators, the artists and for the school, which was undergoing privatisation at the time, as it coincided with the 7th July 2005 suicide attacks in the London underground network, “one of which happened at the Edgware Road Station, which was right behind the school.”⁴³ This event had a particular political significance in one of the most important cultural centres for many diaspora communities from the Middle East. At that moment, the former project coordinators found themselves “really embedded in a lot of different... complicated relationships in the neighbourhood”, out of which came “a desire for the gallery’s work in the neighbourhood and in the school, at the very least to continue”.⁴⁴ Around 2006, the Serpentine began fundraising for a more intensive project in the neighbourhood, and after almost two years they were finally able to launch the Edgware Road project in May 2008.

The newly appointed project coordinator, Janna, felt that the project needed a physical venue that could be used as a resource centre both for artists and for local communities in the neighbourhood. In the period between May 2008 and the opening of the first temporary shop in June 2009, the project organisers began establishing connections with local businesses in order to position the Centre and to develop its programme of activities as much as possible in dialogue with the communities inhabiting the neighbourhood, and partly also to gain support and access to a more permanent space rent-free:

We had our meetings in cafes, we knew all the waiters, we started doing projects with people who run the cafes [...] we got to know the culture of transaction on the road, it was a really important period, and it was really important in some ways not to have a space [...] as a way to get to know people, because it is a transactional road, it’s a road that’s based on economic transaction and... your entry into that is through that, there is no other way, you have to. If you are going to have an event in a space, you need to bring in customers and money, if you are going to have a meeting, they are restaurants, they are businesses and they need to make... money. And actually

⁴² The Dis-assembly project involved commissions to three artists (Rubne Islam, Basul Abdullallah, and Christian Boltanski) who developed individual projects with the students using photography and film over around three years.

⁴³ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

at the time it was during the recession, at the beginning, so everyone was very stressed out about their businesses.⁴⁵

By ‘not having a space’, the project coordinators were able to engage in economic transactions that were seen as important entry points into the cultures of the area and a crucial basis to be accepted by businesses and residents as people invested in the area in the long term. This initial continued presence in the neighbourhood was also crucial to gain the trust of local residents and traders, most of whom “didn’t know how to locate us” and “weren’t thinking that it was really great that we were from the Serpentine [because] they didn’t know what the Serpentine was. Everyone thinks the Serpentine is a lake in Hyde Park! [Laugh]”⁴⁶ While most of the outreach projects up to that moment had relied on institutional connections with local schools, the Edgware Road Project tried to establish direct personal relationships with the many migrant-owned independent businesses on the road.

The project’s initial presence in cafes and shops had also a more political dimension based on the desire to support a ‘heritage’ that was not visible in the official discourse of regeneration at the time. The Edgware Road is under the overlapping jurisdictions of Transport for London and Westminster Council, and this complex landscape was presented as a hindrance to comprehensive regeneration schemes, as even small alterations to the road required complex partnerships and negotiations.⁴⁷ A partnership called the Edgware Road Dialogue Group was set up by the Council precisely to ensure collaborations between different organisations and stakeholders in order to regenerate the area, but the process was

Bringing together the HSBC, and the Hilton, and Starbucks... and all of the multinationals... and the landlords, but not the migrant-owned businesses [...] there was an ongoing plea in the development and in the Business Improvement District that the Council was trying to formulate, a constant discussion of heritage and reviving the heritage of the area.⁴⁸

To the Centre for Possible Studies’ coordinator, the use of the idea of ‘reviving the heritage of the area’ to legitimise a regeneration plan was problematic, as she saw it as a means of controlling the symbolic economy of the neighbourhood by promoting

⁴⁵ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ In the words of Janna “there is a kind of really interesting correspondence between [the reason] why the traffic lights don’t work [laugh] and why they are leaving things as they are!” *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Ibid. See also Westminster Council 2006: *Edgware Road Action Plan*.

a selective view of its histories and communities.⁴⁹ A telling example of the official understanding of the local heritage was a current argument in the Edgware Road Action Plan about the absence of public spaces and about the necessity to improve the streetscape through street furniture and other urban design projects.⁵⁰ For Janna, this argument contained a very narrow reading of what constituted a public space: “I had a real suspicion about that, because... of course there were no public squares with some utopian Habermasian-like speech-act going on! With pigeons flying around or something!”⁵¹

Janna’s ironic remark draws on what she understands as an implicit exclusion, in the regeneration discourse, of other understandings of urban public spaces, especially in the context of an area inhabited by a large majority of groups from middle-eastern diasporas. To explore this, the coordinators commissioned a sound-based mapping project and a one-block study based on archival research and interviews with current and previous business owners, which became an oral history online archive.⁵² As the research progressed, the practitioners

found these amazing personal archives of stories about how the spaces had been used... one cafe had had a group of Egyptian intellectuals that had been having meetings there since the 1970s [...] we found that one place that is now a restaurant used to be a cinema, and had a prayer room, and a library, and also became the distribution centre for all middle-eastern films in England [...] really important histories of... migrant cultures in the area. And of course they had no access to any kind of public spaces, so the cafes became the public spaces and the places of interaction and politicisation.⁵³

In the cultural conflicts over “who belongs”⁵⁴ to the heritage of the neighbourhood, the coordinators felt that “it would be quite important to put into that discussion the other heritage, the other forms of history in this area”⁵⁵ and that their project could

⁴⁹ The mobilisation of competing place-based identities in processes of redevelopment is a central urban cultural struggle, as discussed in Zukin, S. 1995: *The cultures of cities*. Oxford: Blackwell.

⁵⁰ Westminster Council 2006: *Edgware Road Action Plan*, p. 15.

⁵¹ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

⁵² The CAMP archive became an online platform <http://www.edgwareroad.org/>. See CAMP 2011: *Pleasure: A block study Part 1*. London.

⁵³ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

⁵⁴ See Sharon Zukin’s introductory discussion to the cultural politics of cities, in Zukin, *The cultures of cities*, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

contribute to make visible these important but invisible sites of radical histories of middle-eastern migration.⁵⁶

Negotiating a place rebranding strategy

One of the big problems is accessibility to the owner, to landlords, because they hide behind so many companies or agents [...] and to get hold of them is very, very difficult... and especially if they don't really care, then it's nearly impossible.⁵⁷

During this initial period the coordinators of the Centre for Possible Studies were also actively looking for a rent-free vacant property, if possible on street level, as the funds raised would not have been sufficient to afford renting a property at market rent in the area. Aware that rent-free use “relies on the cooperation of landlords” they found that their biggest barrier was finding ways to contact them.⁵⁸ At first they approached the City of Westminster, but learnt that the management of council properties had been outsourced to the private estate agency Knight Frank “who are very unlikely to give anything [for] free”.⁵⁹ Direct phone inquiries for existing vacant shops on the road were equally unsuccessful. Janna explained how many shops were traceable to an intermediary Dubai-based company called SkyWater, which, as explained to her by an employee, was only managing the properties while somebody else owned the lease, so they couldn't start any negotiations without contacting the leaseholder, and many leaseholders weren't contactable because they were on a hundred-year lease.⁶⁰ A more fruitful strategy consisted in attending meetings of the already mentioned Edgware Road Dialogue Group, which brought together representatives from Westminster City Council, Transport for London, the Metropolitan Police, various local business associations, as well as the large private landowners of the area, and which acted as the unofficial gatekeeper to the neighbourhood. In Janna's words “you go to the Dialogue Group to

⁵⁶ The continued and active presence of the coordinators in the area and the implicit and explicit mapping activities that took place in that initial period were crucial to inform the type of programming and exchanges that would characterise the project in the following years, as partly visible in a retrospective exhibition about the Edgware Road Project at the Serpentine Gallery in March 2012, http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2012/02/on_the_edgware_road.html [accessed 22nd March 2012].

⁵⁷ Interview with Meanwhile Space CIC founders, 1st July 2011.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. The same observation was made by Group+Work practitioners while they were in the process of trying to find a council-owned empty property in Westminster for their project.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

get the... blessing of everyone [and] there was the expectation that we would go and report in to them about what we were doing, even though they weren't funders."⁶¹ Through the Dialogue Group, they were able to approach the two largest and oldest landlords in the area, the Church Commissioners and the Portman Estate.⁶²

The Church Commissioners owned the first shop used by the Centre, an empty storefront with a basement at 14 Porchester Place, a small street adjacent Connaught Square on the west side of the Edgware Road. The shop had been a 'well loved' hair salon that had closed after twenty years because of a rent increase.⁶³ The Church Commissioners had "a vision [...] for upgrading that area" through attracting art galleries and events such as an antique car festival: "they wanted to rebrand that little area as [...] a village-boutique kind of area, extremely high-end", which was renamed in 2010 'Connaught Village: The Hyde Park Estate Retail Quarter' [fig. 4.3].⁶⁴

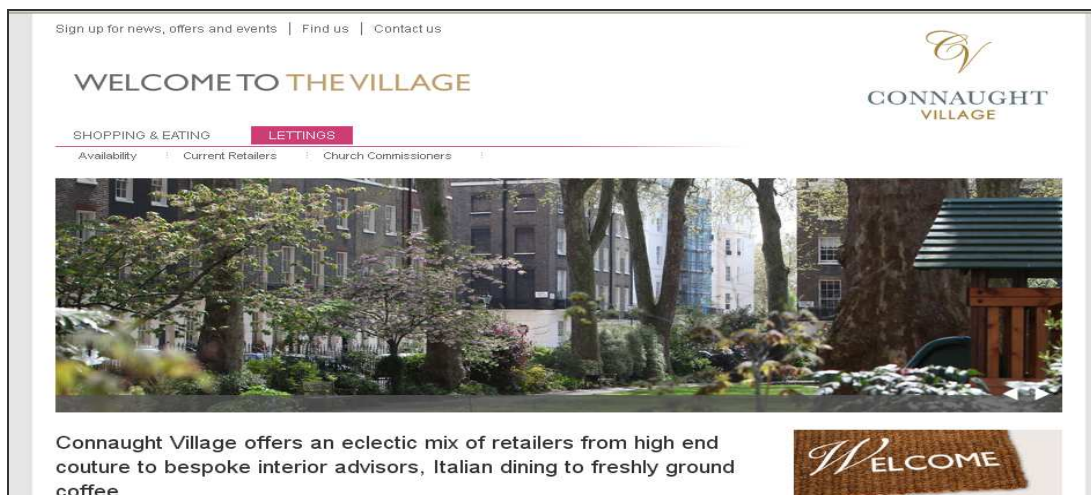


Figure 4.3 Screenshot of Connaught Village official website [accessed 22nd May 2013].

From conversations with business owners in the area, the coordinators learnt that the Church Commissioners had been "letting people come in on very low rent,

⁶¹ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

⁶² The Church Commissioners is the organisation charged with managing the assets of the Church of England, see <http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/churchcommissioners.aspx> [accessed 12th May 2012]. The Portman Estate is one of the largest landlords in Marylebone since the 16th Century; see <http://www.portmanestate.co.uk/index.html> [accessed 12th May 2012].

⁶³ The website of the hair salon Tyrone & Company is still live, and there is no information regarding the shop having closed down, <http://www.tyroneandcompany.com/index.html> [accessed 12th May 2012].

⁶⁴ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011. See Connaught Village web portal at <http://connaught-village.co.uk/#> and the design brief on Red Cow Creative agency's portfolio: <http://www.redcowcreative.com/what-we-do/print-design/connaught-village/> [accessed 23rd February 2012].

and then increase[d] it incrementally, with very significant increments [...] that were much greater than the capacity for that neighbourhood to actually generate a lot of business”.⁶⁵ Between 2009 and 2010, this strategy resulted in a high presence of vacant shops in a very wealthy residential area, formerly the place of residence of the Blair family, a few minutes walk from Marble Arch underground station and from the northern edge of Hyde Park. In line with the art and design aims for the rebranding of Connaught Square, in 2009 the Church Commissioners had also been running a pop-up scheme that gave vacant shop-fronts to young graduates from the London School of Fashion to showcase their work.⁶⁶

The project coordinators entered the space in May 2009 on a three-month lease with a four weeks notice, and the Centre for Possible Studies was finally opened to the public in June 2009 as a resource centre for research and film projects on Middle Eastern traditions and histories.⁶⁷ After the first lease renewal, and after only four months of effective public use, in September 2009 the Centre was given notice to leave. Although not publicly stated, the coordinators felt that the activities of the Centre did not fulfil the Church Commissioners’ expectations of a high-end public art gallery fitting with their rebranding of the area: “they liked that we were a gallery, but I don’t think that they really liked that we didn’t show any art!”⁶⁸ To illustrate her point she recounted an anecdote:

We were always very clear that it is a resource centre called the Centre for Possible Studies, but I remember, when we first took over the space, we had an artist in residence [...] she took a chalk marker and wrote in the window ‘Centre for Possible Studies’ and did some drawings, it was really lovely, like little spontaneous kinds of things, and immediately they [the Church Commissioners officers] were like, ‘this can’t be your signage!’ [...] They never said it but we heard rumours from other people that some of the businesses also didn’t like that we were a production centre not a gallery.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ They arranged to have the shop rent-free and received business rates exemption because the Serpentine is a registered charity. Since the shop had been a hairdresser salon, their arrangement did not require a change of use. See also the specific local policy document ‘Requests from artists / arts organisations for using empty properties’, 2009, Arts Service, Westminster City Council [accessed 22nd February 2010].

⁶⁸ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

The anecdote about the aesthetics of the shop sign and the rumours about the existing businesses' negative opinions on the Centre point in the direction of a friction between the brand identity that the Church Commissioners were trying to develop for the area and the programme of the Centre as a studio and residency space. In autumn 2009, the coordinators were able to negotiate to stay in the property for a further six weeks, paying rent, after which they were told that "somebody else really wanted to move in", yet the shop was empty for another year: "we'd go past all the time, and it was empty. And that was really distressing, actually."⁷⁰ By early 2011, many of the vacant shops were occupied by high-end shops and the Centre's first unit had become a boutique shop of a celebrities' jewellery brand.⁷¹

A long wait and a short occupation

Once the lease for Porchester Place ended, the project coordinators returned to the contacts they had made through the Edgware Road Dialogue Group, and approached the other major landowner of the area, the Portman Estate. Soon after they were offered a shop front on Seymour Street, on the east side of the Edgware Road, but they waited almost six months, from November 2009 till May 2010, to enter the unit because they had to file an expensive and complicated temporary change of use, which the Serpentine Gallery paid for.⁷² The new unit had been used first as an Italian restaurant in the 1980s, then as an Indian and finally as a Lebanese restaurant, and had become vacant when the Portman Estate had decided to redevelop the building, known as Marble Arch House.

The reasons why they were able to access that space were, in the words of the project coordinators, "a bit more nuanced" than the Church Commissioners' expectation of an art and design rebranding. Janna explained how in her view the 'official' pop-up discourse around the performance of vibrancy certainly played a role but was not the main reason for the Estate to support the Centre's activities:

⁷⁰ *Source*: the floor plan of the area, and Connaught Village Hyde Park Retail Quarter London W2 on the website of Briant Champion Long, see <http://www.connaught-village.co.uk/> [accessed 23rd February 2012].

⁷¹ See Vogue Britain 2010: De Roemer's Home, <http://www.vogue.co.uk/news/2010/12/14/de-roemer-opens-a-store-in-connaught-village> [accessed 12th March 2012].

⁷² It "had to be a temporary change of use, so that they could maintain some openness on how they would use the building in the future. So we went through that, and it cost a lot of money, because we paid the legal fees on the change of uses, on both uses, about the application for current use and the change of use", conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

Of course, having an empty space makes things look abandoned, and they wanted the place to look vibrant, and there is a business case for us being here, but it wasn't only about that, and that has made a difference to the kind of relationship we had [...] we didn't work with the asset manager [...] we worked with somebody who's higher up, at the level of Strategy. He had some involvement with the gallery before, and his wife is an artist, and she works on social engaged projects, and she was an architect, so she had a very particular interest, and both of them do, in site-specific art and socially-engaged art.⁷³

The 'more nuanced' relationship with the officer in charge of negotiating the use of the property was based on a 'very particular' personal interest not just in contemporary art in general, but more specifically in site-specific and socially engaged projects, where the stress is often on the process of collaboration with a community and on the use of a space, rather than on the production of tangible 'artistic' products. For Janna, dealing with a property officer who understood the process-based dimension of the Centre, meant a greater degree of autonomy in the use of the space:

There isn't the same kind of monitoring of the space [...] it's maybe not as studio-like as the other space was [but] it often looks like it looks right now, with things laying around all over the place, and he likes that and he's fine with it. He's been very easy about signage and things like that.⁷⁴

The Centre was officially reopened in Seymour Street on Sunday 30th May 2010,⁷⁵ secured until May 2011 and was then on a six-month lease renewable for another year.⁷⁶ Six months after reopening, however, British Land, the development contractor in charge of the redevelopment of the building, announced that it would begin works at the end of summer 2011. The leases of many businesses in the block, including some very well established restaurants, were up for renewal at the beginning of January 2011 and were only offered a six months lease, which most refused, leaving more vacant shops.⁷⁷ At the end of July 2011, the Centre was given a one-month notice and was once again without a venue: "literally we've only made

⁷³ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Email invite to the opening, personal archive.

⁷⁶ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011

⁷⁷ Field notes, December, February and June 2010, photograph of notice on the door of the Lebanese restaurant lamenting their enforced closure after 20 years of business.

it a year [...] [it's been] a bit stressful".⁷⁸ In the end the Portman Estate provided the centre with another property, this time a residential building, at 21 Gloucester Place where the centre relocated to in autumn 2011.⁷⁹ Shortly after that, Marble House headed for total demolition, which took place in late 2011, and rebuilding. The planned new building, to be completed by late 2013, comprises offices, retail space, and luxury residential apartments.⁸⁰

Despite the long delays and stressful relocations, the funding raised and the institutional support of a large public art gallery allowed a degree of continuity in the programming of the Edgware Road project and of the Centre for Possible Studies. Thanks to this, the coordinators of the space were able to commission participatory research projects involving local residents, students and traders, and to engage extensively and over a long period of time with the neighbourhood. The type of projects that the coordinators aimed to initiate pushed them to engage with businesses and other local actors, which enabled them to understand critically the symbolic position of their project in relation to discourses of regeneration and rebranding.

Their experience with large landowners revealed the expectations around the role of a temporary art project in the context of a high-end residential and retail area in Westminster. Even within an accepted discursive and practical framework of temporary art shops, Janna's accounts of the different rationales for accessing the two shop fronts rent-free pointed to two very different understandings of 'art' projects, from a boutique art gallery to a socially-engaged and community-oriented studio. Their strategies of outreach and the small frictions that their community-oriented activities generated offer important insights into parallel issues experienced by other, more short-term and self-organised community-oriented projects, in their everyday encounters with the 'public' as will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

⁷⁸ Conversation with Janna, 13th June 2011.

⁷⁹ The Centre for Possible Studies left this location in spring 2013. As of summer 2013, relocation is uncertain.

⁸⁰ British Land 2011: *Committed Developments: Marble Arch House*, <http://www.britishland.com/462-committed-developments> [accessed 15th January 2012].

Studio at the Elephant

Studio at the Elephant project was a temporary community-oriented project and residency space in two vacant shops in the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre in Southwark, South London [fig. 4.4]. The first was open from the 1st to the 12th November 2010, and the second from the 4th March to the 24th June 2011. The project originated from a project of artist Rebecca Davies, that had used illustration and filmmaking to document the life and social uses of the Shopping Centre. The artist had lived as a child in estates around the Elephant and Castle area and felt a special attachment to the space: “I was brought up constantly coming to the shopping centre, so I am quite attached to the place and it’s somewhere that in my eyes hasn’t really changed since I was a child.”⁸¹

Upon returning to the area after studying at a university in Scotland, between 2008 and 2010, she visited the centre regularly and collected observational sketches and drawings, sound and video material, interviews with local traders and residents, as well as excerpts of overheard conversations.⁸² She understood her semi-ethnographic visual and textual snippets as mementos and as a celebration of the ‘varied’ and ‘ethnic’ local communities in a moment when the future of the area was particularly uncertain, as many of the proposed regeneration plans were stalled because of the financial crisis. The planned demolition of the shopping centre in particular had been considerably delayed, although it was generally accepted that it would happen soon. In Rebecca’s words, this added urgency to her project: “at the time I started the project I didn’t know an awful lot about the regeneration. I knew that [the shopping centre] was going to be knocked down and I was sad about it actually, so I thought, well, I’ll make the most of it before it goes.”⁸³ The material she collected and produced converged in a newspaper publication titled *The Elephant* (2010).⁸⁴

⁸¹ Conversation with Rebecca, 3rd December 2010.

⁸² “There’s a lot to be said for just sitting in a cafe for hours, a lot, and especially in the Elephant [...] there are people who meet up every day at 2 o’clock... so I just sat and observed that [...] there were...conversations from all the kinds of different people [...] So you have got your builders, you’ve got your traders, you’ve got your elderly ladies and gents... then you’ve got school kids, students maybe from LCC [London College of Communication], so it’s so varied, and there’s all so ethnic as well, you have the Colombian community, African, West Indian, and then the kind of Irish and English”, *ibid*.

⁸³ Conversation with Rebecca, 3rd December 2010.

⁸⁴ Posted on Studio at the Elephant blog <http://studioattheelephant.blogspot.co.uk/> on Monday, 27th September 2010.

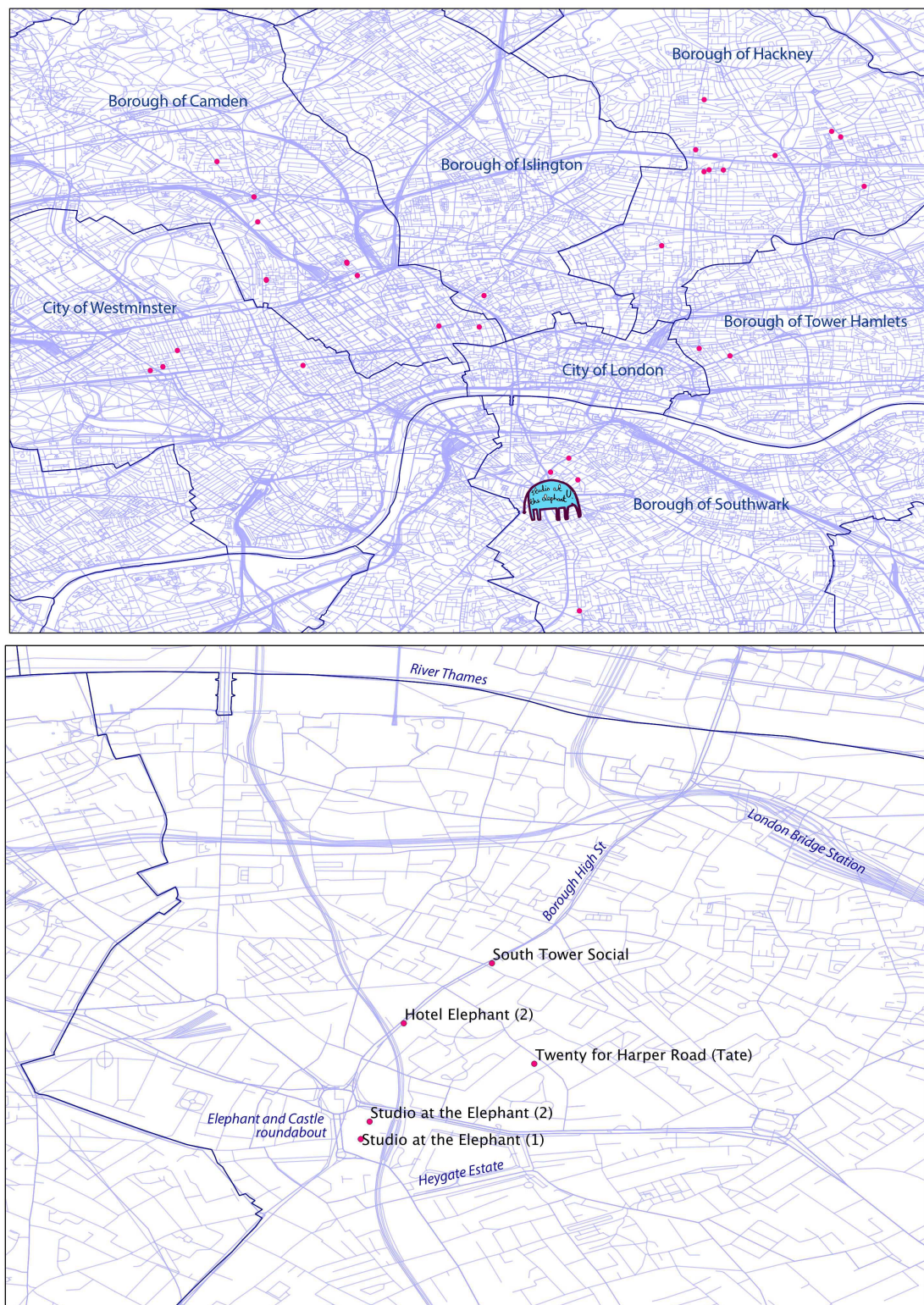


Figure 4.4 Map of the Studio at the Elephant shops in Elephant and Castle, North Southwark (above) and in relation to other local temporary shop front projects (below).

After finishing producing the newspaper, she felt that “it was necessary to move the project into the shopping centre” in order “to give [the newspapers] out to people [...] and I wanted them to be free because it was about them and it was for

them”.⁸⁵ In summer 2010, as she started to look for a vacant unit from which to distribute her publication, she heard the news of the regeneration agreement signed by Southwark Council and the developer Lend Lease, which confirmed the demolition plans. Bringing her work back into the space was thus felt to be integral to the aims of the project “as a preservation of the Elephant inside” in the context of the potential displacement of traders and residents. She referred to her aim as:

a celebration of the community at the Elephant, and although a lot of people have a kind of love-hate relationship with the actual building, essentially what makes this building are the people who are inside it. The atmosphere and the activity that goes on in here [...] I’d quite like people to see this, because... because I love the Elephant, and I just like other people to see what the Elephant is like because as you probably know lots of people go past it and almost never come in.⁸⁶

The recent history of semi-dereliction, of looming demolition and uncertain redevelopment had negatively marked the image of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre as abandoned. In the middle and late 1990s, and early 2000s, the high levels of vacancy and its fame as a dystopian ‘failed’ location had already attracted artists and curators for experimental art projects, many of which disappeared without leaving traces. One of the most high profile was *Salon3* (2001), a temporary publicly-funded non-commercial art gallery run by professional curators Rebecca Gordon Nesbit and Hans Ulrich Obrist, from a vacant unit (unit 318) on the lower ground floor.⁸⁷ The fame of a dilapidated and derelict shopping centre remained well into the mid 2000s, when the shopping centre’s owners St Modwen decided not to refurbish building because the future of the site had been, in the words of one of the centre’s officers, ‘up in the air’.⁸⁸

After noticing several vacant units, Rebecca decided to approach first Southwark Council, and then St Modwen, to propose a short-term art residency in one of the units. The latter offered her a rent-free unit for two weeks in November, which came to her as a positive surprise: “I just didn’t imagine... I thought, I’ll get a space for two weeks and then I’ll come across the next problem, which is obviously

⁸⁵ “I had all these newspapers at home and they were just constantly reminding me every morning ‘do something with me please!’”, conversation with Rebecca 3rd December 2010.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Cooke, J. 2006: Heterotopia: art ephemera, libraries and alternative space. *Art Documentation* 2(25), pp. 37-40.

⁸⁸ Interview with a representative of the shopping center, 10th October 2011.

money, and how to bloody pay for the rent!’”⁸⁹ In the practitioner’s narrative, the question of funding thus became an issue only once the space had been secured. What is surprisingly absent from this account is that due to the delay in the regeneration plans, since 2008 temporary community activities in the shopping centre had greatly intensified, from temporary art exhibitions and theatre performances, to community projects.⁹⁰ The first shop leased to Rebecca, for instance, unit 215-216, had been used as a temporary pop-up theatre location the previous summer (2010), and was part of a series of pop-up shops in the shopping centre. As will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, these precedents certainly helped to gain access to a vacant unit rent-free, and contributed to creating a performative frame for the activities of Studio at the Elephant.

Diverse economies and local support

In terms of the economies of the first Studio at the Elephant, when in early September 2010 St Modwen confirmed the availability of a vacant unit for two weeks, the artist began looking for sponsorship, first approaching the local council, and then, when that turned unsuccessful, local businesses and traders:

I got £150 donated from T-Clark, which is the electrical company that’s based on Walworth Road, and they’ve been there for years and years, it’s a kind of family run company [...] it was just sponsorship if you like, in return for mentioning T-Clark. I think they put money in local community groups and things like that occasionally... It just involved reading my proposal to them and they supported it, because they are obviously based in the Elephant themselves [emphasis added].⁹¹

The artist’s personal relationship with the area and the rationale of her project, enabled her to create connections with businesses that strongly identified with the Elephant, and this example shows the importance of presenting her idea as a community project rooted in the neighbourhood. She also relied on personal connections to recycle furniture going to waste:

⁸⁹ Conversation with Rebecca 3rd December 2010.

⁹⁰ Diary entries from November 2009 to December 2011.

⁹¹ Conversation with Rebecca 3rd December 2010.

I relied on people donating furniture, so I got.... the armchair and the sofa from the Walworth Methodist Church [...] they wanted to get rid of them! [...] And then I got a lot of chairs and furniture from my TRA [Tenants and Residents Association], which I am a member of the committee now as well, they were really helpful. [...] My bedroom was mental. I had all this furniture and no way to store it!⁹²

Relying on existing personal networks and connections locally helped with the set up, but did not provide a form of income for the practitioner's labour, nor for the many volunteers and participants in the space. Thanks to a tax rebate, Rebecca was able to leave her full time job in a pub for four weeks in order to prepare the programme and to be in the space full time over the two weeks of opening:

I was working full time until October, then in October I got a tax rebate, so I could afford to pay my rent until December [...] suddenly I thought, right, I am in a position where it's tight but I can afford to give up my job a few weeks before having the space, and make the space [look] good and organise it.⁹³

She also decided to reinvest in the project the little revenue she had made from selling work related to the Elephant, such as drawings, any donations received for the newspapers, and to invest "a little bit of savings".⁹⁴ By the end of the two weeks over November 2010, she admitted to be "a little bit out of pocket" but felt that this effort was "like an investment if you like"⁹⁵ towards negotiating with St Modwen a second, slightly more permanent space.

While Rebecca was the only person in a position to be in the space every day over the two-week period, she estimated that around 20 volunteers, between friends and artists from her professional network had helped her in the space, or used it for an event:

I sent out an email about the project to a lot of friends and artists whose work I liked, and to people that I thought would get something out of putting on a workshop, and then waited for their response, and just rang around and talked to people to see if they'd be interested. Luckily I had a few friends that were in a position where they could give their time for free. And I really, really

⁹² Conversation with Rebecca 3rd December 2010.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

relied on that [...] I am so thankful to the people that did come down, you know, painted the windows for free, put in a fiver for tea... things like that.⁹⁶

Similar to the organiser of Make-Do, Rebecca was able to draw from a network of friends whose employment situation was flexible enough to enable them to ‘give their time for free’. Part of her coordinating role also involved making the participants aware of the history of the site: “I asked them to do a bit of research before they came in so [...] they weren’t new to it. And most of them had seen how my project had evolved, and they knew about the Elephant from me banging on about it!”⁹⁷ One example of site-specific new work produced in the temporary unit was an archival research about histories of dance and dancing places in the area.⁹⁸

During her time in the first Studio at the Elephant unit, Rebecca also started what were to become long-term collaborations with researchers and artists who had worked in the area for a long time, such as local resident and established photography artist Eva Sajovic. Eva had received a small grant from Southwark Council towards the production of the book *Home from Home* that collected part of her long-term oral history project in Elephant and Castle.⁹⁹ The meeting between the two artists was crucial for the development of the second space of the Studio. Similarly to Rebecca’s newspaper, Eva’s book had been given to the individuals that she had photographed, but hadn’t been officially launched yet. The shared passion for the area was important to their collaboration: “we’ve both got a love for this space. We are both doing similar projects, although she is a photographer and I am an illustrator”.¹⁰⁰ They combined their skills to re-photograph some of the residents and traders of the book in front of Rebecca’s illustrations, and used the unit to launch the book.

⁹⁶ Conversation with Rebecca 3rd December 2010.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Interviews and photographs are also available on the online platform <http://www.homefromhome-online.com/> [accessed 12th March 2012].

¹⁰⁰ Conversation with Rebecca 3rd December 2010. “Eva will be joining us in the first week of stay at Unit 215. On Tuesday 2nd and Wednesday 3rd Eva will be setting up a photo studio and inviting all those she photographed in the *Home from Home* project to come and be re-photographed in the space. Rebecca Davies will be trying her best to re-create the subject’s usual surroundings using a paintbrush. On Tuesday 9th at 6.30, Eva will also be talking about her book *Home From Home*, a collection of her photographs and written by Sarah Butler, which will be available in the space.” Blog post, 17th October 2010, ‘Eva Sajovic at the Elephant’, <http://studioattheelephant.blogspot.co.uk/> [accessed 20th October 2010].

A full time job, a large network, but no funding

After the end of the first shop, Eva and Rebecca applied for another rent-free vacant unit (207-8) in the shopping centre, which ran from March to June 2011. This second unit was formerly a Southwark Council office, which apparently had been vacated a few months prior as a result of the uncertain negotiations between St Modwen and Southwark Council, and of the tension between St Modwen and Lend Lease, in late 2010 and early 2011¹⁰¹. Beyond using the space as a studio for their own work, the practitioners posted an open call on their website describing the shop as “a place of temporary residence to visiting artists”.¹⁰² Art practitioners were invited to propose events or one-week residencies in the space, in exchange for which each practitioner or artist collective would run a free community event or a workshop. The programme brought together a constellation of artists, researchers and local residents, some of whom had previous experience of working with local communities into the area, while other collaborations are originated from encounters through the space.

The diagram in figure 4.5 was drawn in the course of a conversation about the networks mobilised by the Studio at the Elephant practitioners. Each link of the diagram relates to a long story of personal and professional connections. In the case of Raquel (bottom left), for instance, she had heard about Eva’s photographic work but did not know her website. One day, as she worked in a shop not far from the Elephant, she saw someone carrying the *Home from Home* book, and this person told her that she could have a copy from the unit in the shopping centre. One of the consequences of her visit to the space was inviting LAWAS, the Latin American Workers Association, for a residency in the shop, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

¹⁰¹ Private conversation of the artists with two former officers from the regeneration team (art and media) who had been encouraged to enter early retirement because of the cuts to local authorities’ budgets. “They said that Southwark had to pull out because of the tension between Lend Lease and St Modwen [...] they pulled out suddenly because they couldn’t be seen on St Modwen’s turf while trying to negotiate with Lend Lease”, conversation with Eva and Rebecca 2nd August 2011.

¹⁰² Conversation with Eva and Rebecca 15th March 2011, see also their online open call on <http://studio.homefromhome-online.com/> [accessed 27th April 2011].

£250 from St Modwen.¹⁰³ According to the artists, the fact that Eva had previously received funding from Southwark Council created a chain of trust as St Modwen “trusted those [Southwark Council] who trusted her”.¹⁰⁴ The artists were also able to mobilise in-kind support from the Council, which had occupied the second unit and which let them use a monitor and some furniture that had been left into the space. Through this connection with the council the artists were able to borrow a video projector from nearby London College of Communication.¹⁰⁵ They also received other forms of in-kind support from traders and offices on the upper ground floor, such as being able to use the internet connection of Blooming Fields, an advice centre for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in a shop opposite their unit.¹⁰⁶ Other traders in the shopping centre too offered support in exchange for sponsorship, such as Mamuska, a Polish restaurant, which provided free food for the event the *Art of Conversation over Goulash*. At the end of the project, the artists could claim that the entire second project was run on a production budget of only £750.¹⁰⁷

In order to spread out the activities and to manage the intensity of their presence in the space, Eva and Rebecca had originally decided that there would only be one event or workshop a week, and that they would keep an open door policy only for two days a week.¹⁰⁸ They wanted the programme to develop organically through the duration of their stay, which meant that the schedule of activity would only be decided a few weeks at a time, and that there would always be space for new people to propose events and workshops. In practice, the result of this decision was an almost continuous programming activity so that on the days when the space

¹⁰³ Interview with a representative of the shopping center, 10th October 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Conversation 2nd August 2011, see also interview with St Modwen’s development surveyor, The practitioners had also approached Southwark Council, but were unable to secure funding, crucially also because of the restructuring and downsizing of many departments due to the extensive budget reductions imposed by Central Government, which the local Councillor had officially lamented as “the largest reduction [...] in cash terms, in London”. Southwark Council, 2010: ‘*No room to manoeuvre*’ - *Council leader responds to cuts* http://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/article/221/no_room_to_manoeuvre-council_leader_responds_to_cuts 22nd December 2010 [accessed 13th January 2011]. In fact, many of the officers that Eva had worked with during the development of her *Home from Home* project were made redundant or accepted early retirement in early 2011, informal conversation, 10th February 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Diary entries summer 2011. The little plastic stools ended up in the Heygate Forest school in the Heygate Estate, part of the Elephant and Castle Urban Forest project (2011).

¹⁰⁶ Conversation with Rebecca and Eva on 31st May 2011.

¹⁰⁷ See also Sajovic, E. and Davies, R. (eds) 2012: *Studio at the Elephant*. London: Studio at the Elephant.

¹⁰⁸ Conversation with Rebecca, 12th February 2011.

wasn't open to the public, the artists were meeting people in relation to their programming.

A few weeks into the project, in the middle of March 2011, they realised much to their perplexity that they were already working on the project full time: "it hasn't been planned like that but it just kind of happened".¹⁰⁹ Even if the shop was officially publicly open only twice a week, they realised that they had to be in the space much more often:

Eva: we are here... five days a week. We have been coming sometimes on Sundays. And the meetings that are not walk-in but that are arranged are pretty much all the time, so...

Rebecca: ...and then if we are not here it's because we need the internet because we need to email somebody about funding or on an application or email out a press release and let people know about the next event that is happening and stuff. So, yeah, it's a full time job...

E: ...it's more than that! Because in the evening again, after dinner, you sit back at the computer and organise stuff, plan, email, again, or write applications [...] a lot of it has been organising meetings and planning.¹¹⁰

Their understanding of the amount of practitioners required shifted too as their 'residency' in the shop progressed, and by the end of May 2011 they were adamant that to run such a project properly required more than two people: "any kind of gallery or organisation that has an outreach programme, a department for education... that's like, it's huge! There's a manager, there's a programme [...] two people doing it, it just isn't enough."¹¹¹

While Eva could count on other commissions and cultural projects, as well as teaching, Rebecca had only a little additional source of income through the sale of her illustrations and was barely able to support herself during the four full-time months at the Studio at the Elephant. In the middle of the second Studio at the Elephant residency, she was convinced by family and friends to apply for housing and work benefits, which she received for two months. It was a conflictive decision, which she felt strongly about acknowledging publicly whenever she discussed the project:

¹⁰⁹ Eva, conversation 15th March 2011.

¹¹⁰ Conversation with Eva and Rebecca, 15th March 2011.

¹¹¹ Eva, conversation 31st May 2011.

R: I am completely honest about that! I have done a few [public] talks since, and said... [that] I couldn't have done it unless I was having.. housing benefits and I was signing on. But I knew that I really wanted to do this and I was doing it for five months. And... I don't know whether I agree with this, but some people who do live on the dole and are artists, call the dole their pay, basically. As in like, that's the government paying me to do what I want to do.¹¹²

The practice among artists to treat unemployment benefits as a subsidy for their unpaid artistic projects, or as a safety net for the periods of unemployment in between paid cultural projects is considered fairly common, as arts practitioners tend to belong to the lowest earning sections of the population.¹¹³ During that time, she was in receipt of around £400 a month, enough to support her in the most intensive moment of the project, and to set aside some production money too.¹¹⁴ Claiming unemployment benefits while running an unpaid project was difficult to justify to the officers at the job centre and she had to explain to them in great detail how she spent her time and how she reinvested that money into the project:

I said to them, I am looking for a job but I am also running this project, so actually, this money is sort of supporting me while I do that [...] this money about to go into my account is going to materials for the Elephant. So I had to show the job centre all my receipts, and take them through all of that. It wasn't easy, but it was something that I needed to do.¹¹⁵

She was aware of the levels of socio-economic deprivation in the Elephant, and everyday encounters in the area made her decision particularly conflicted. To illustrate that, she recounted a scene she witnessed during one of her visits at the job centre:

A woman was shouting... so mad and so angry, she was at these computers for searching jobs [...] she was just hitting the computers, and the security came over and said, look, what's up, can I see your CV and then I can help you searching for a job, and she was like, I don't have a fucking CV! She was.. in her late 30s or early 40s, I don't have a fucking CV and he said, if

¹¹² Conversation with Rebecca, 11th November 2011.

¹¹³ As publicly acknowledge even by funding organisations, see Arts Council England, 2010: *Creative Survival in Hard Times*.

¹¹⁴ Conversation with Rebecca, 11th November 2011.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

you don't have a CV, do you have experience? And she was like, experience! 18 years behind bloody bars in prison, that's my experience! And I was like, oh god... [...] There are people that genuinely need that money, and that made me resent doing this project, in a way, and having to sign on because of it.¹¹⁶

The economic arrangements that enabled her to support herself while running the project were a source of internal and external conflict, as she had to justify her decision to welfare officers and, most importantly, to herself while fully aware of her relatively privileged position in relation to other local residents and workers. The situation proved unsustainable, and this was one of the reasons why the project ended in June, even if St Modwen's officers were so enthusiastic about the programme that they offered the opportunity to keep using the shop rent-free for a longer period of time. In Rebecca's word: "I was finding it difficult to rub two pennies together, with running that project and everything. Suddenly I just went, right, I need to stop this for a few months while I get some money together".¹¹⁷

When I asked the representative of the Shopping Centre about his opinions on the Studio at the Elephant project, he praised the artists' "hard work" which had "raised the bar quite significantly" in terms of temporary projects in the centre, and commented that:

I wouldn't expect people to be able to do that because, you know, they [Eva and Rebecca] were doing it solidly every day. Which was amazing. And a lot of people, you know, can't do it, they have got families, they got jobs...¹¹⁸

In this comment, the implicit recognition of the amount of labour and time required to manage an open door temporary project in an empty unit is paired with an explicit understanding of the project as antithetic to most people's life and work commitments. It was apparent from the remark that for the managers of the centre the two artists existed in a parallel universe of voluntary passionate work with no social responsibility or economic constraints. When I mentioned this comment to Rebecca, she laughed and said that on several occasions they suspected that the managers thought they were "two lesbians with no responsibilities!"¹¹⁹ In reality, Eva, who has two teenage children, was also working on a parallel project about

¹¹⁶ Conversation with Rebecca, 11th November 2011.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Interview with a representative of the shopping center, 10th October 2011.

¹¹⁹ Conversation with Rebecca, 11th November 2011.

Roma Gypsies communities, while Rebecca was using the little spare time she had in the Studio to continue her commercial illustration work.

Months after the end of their project, the two practitioners reflected on their lack of budget for the space, and on what would have been the ideal scenario for them to carry on with the Studio. They found that small private funding was easier to obtain than arts subsidies and other forms of public support.¹²⁰ Receiving a salary from St Modwen was also discussed in hypothetical terms: “if they had given us a salary, for me that would have been one of the best jobs in the world. I mean, as it was I couldn’t survive”.¹²¹ For Rebecca in particular becoming a formal employee of the Centre would have allowed her to “at least make ends meet”.¹²² The relationship between the artists and the management, moreover, would have been more straightforward because it would have been based on money: “paradoxically [we] would have perhaps more space to negotiate [our] own position [and] bringing a bit of one’s own to the system”.¹²³

The lack of funding, which translated into a lack of a continuative temporal horizon was particularly difficult to manage in practitioners’ relationship with the community. Discussing the rapid urban changes that were facing London in the run up to the 2012 Olympic Games, Rebecca wondered how she and Eva could find a way to get “a sort of longevity in the project”, something that they had discussed many times with other community-oriented practitioners involved in the Elephant. By November 2011, Eva was able to find some funding to run a project in the local Cuming Museum, on Walworth Road, but in Rebecca’s opinion such an outcome was rare, as community artists are often unable to “stick to an area” and have to continuously pursue new projects:

R: There is a strong pressure on artists involving themselves in a community, and running some sort of art project... [it is about] how involved [one] gets.. [...] a lot of artists, and rightly so, are relying on Arts Council or heritage and arts funding for income. When that funding runs out, they go on to another place to do another project [...] but...
me: but..?

¹²⁰ Conversation with Rebecca, 11th November 2011.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Conversation with Eva and Rebecca, 2nd August 2011.

¹²³ Ibid.

R: It's a strategy... I think I am sort of, I have got a bit too involved in a way, and it was quite... not emotional, but it was... I am quite sensitive and... it got a bit hard for me at times...and I couldn't...detach myself from... everything.¹²⁴

The tyranny of short-term funding to which community artists are subjected to is here described as requiring the ability to detach oneself from a place and a project, and move on. The resentment caused by the financial hardship is, in Rebecca's experience, intertwined with the tension between a desire to involve oneself in a community for the long term and the economic and temporal foreclosure of a project-based engagement. In the practitioner's account, this tension is described and interiorised as a problem of personal sensitivity, as her inability to 'detach herself': the emotional attachment to the place that had been such an important rationale for the project and for gaining local support, is seen almost as a professional shortcoming running counter to the demand for flexibility of existing arts funding structures.

The OffMarket

The last project of temporary reuse to be discussed in this chapter is the OffMarket, a name associated with two shop fronts on Lower Clapton Road, North Hackney, that were squatted between January and July 2011. As in the examples of Non Commercial House and Well Furnished mentioned in the previous chapter, for the OffMarket collective too the decision to occupy a vacant shop front was based on a desire to create an accessible information and meeting space: "the space was to be an anarcho-hub in North-East London", as explained by a member of the collective.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Conversation with Rebecca, 11th November 2011.

¹²⁵ Conversation with a former member of the OffMarket collective, 14th April 2012. In the squatting scene the desire to open a space for social and political activities often conditions the choice of the vacant property to be occupied, with a preference for properties with large rooms and with easy street level access such as pubs, warehouses or large community centres. Social centres inside squatted pubs include: as *The Hand and Racquet Pub* in Leicester Square, occupied in Autumn 2009; *Globe Road* in early Spring 2010; *Three Cots Lane* squat, Spring 2010; the *Really Free School* at the Black Horse Pub by Tottenham Court Road, February-March 2011. For social centres in squatted warehouses and community centres, it is worth mentioning the *Lift'n'Hoist*, Autumn-Winter 2009; and, in a former shop arcades, the *Ratstar* in Camberwell, occupied from May 2010 to late November 2011, as well as *195 Mare Street*, the site of a former refuge for ex-prisoner women, and a local social club, which was occupied from the end of 2009 till August 2010. The history of the site and a personal experience of



Figure 4.6 Map of OffMarket shops in relation to other pop-ups in inner London (above) and to other temporary shops in Hackney (below).

The OffMarket actively avoided becoming a ‘party space’ as many social centres in warehouses or large residential buildings are called when their activities revolve

the social centre are documented in *A personal account on 195 Mare St squat*, posted on the 4th March 2011, <http://london.indymedia.org/articles/7726> [accessed 25th March 2011].

mainly around large-scale fundraising events. This choice aligns squatted shop fronts to the tradition of radical infoshops which serve a variety of purposes: “zine archive, distribution point for free publications, meeting room, day care centre, concert venue, free school, mail drop for activist groups, bookstore”¹²⁶.

The choice of site and location [fig. 4.6] was the result of several strategic considerations. The first was the presence of several vacant shops at short distance from each other, which was seen as positive in case of eviction to maintaining a degree of spatial continuity. The second was the recent presence of several successful temporary squatted social spaces in Hackney since 2009, as discussed in Chapter 2, which the centre could rely on as a social infrastructure of volunteers and sympathetic users to be mobilised.¹²⁷ Finally, the chosen sites had been observed and studied for a long time, partly also through research on the land registry, to ensure that the shops had been empty for a long time and that there were no pending planning applications or changes of use. This fairly customary procedure is justified by a shared squatters’ ethics not to occupy properties that are in use or about to be used, as well as by a pragmatic judgement on the potential length of the occupation.¹²⁸

On the 3rd February 2011, the launch of the first space was announced in an *Indymedia London* post, under the heading ‘OffMarket Opens New Space: Access & Info’:

We, the OffMarket collective, take disused buildings and turn them into open resources. We have just moved in to 111 Lower Clapton Road E5 ONP. It is a small space, only a shop front consisting of a main front room and a very tiny room at the back, but there are lots of ideas about what to do with this space!

¹²⁶ Dodge, C. 1998: Street Libraries: Infoshops and Alternative Reading Rooms Retrieved through the Web.archive.org [accessed 10th March 2012].

¹²⁷ Conversation with a former member of the OffMarket collective, 14th April 2012. It is important in this context to refer to Alex Vasudevan’s most recent work on activist urban infrastructures, as presented in his talk ‘Infrastructures and the Micro-Politics of Occupation: The Everyday Geographies of Squatting in Berlin’, presentation at the City Centre, Queen Mary University of London, 29th January 2013.

¹²⁸ This custom is evidenced, for instance, in the Advisory Services for Squatters’ *Squatters Handbook* (2009). The booklet, which contains legal and practical advice, has been published since 1976 but discontinued in 2010/11 after the criminalisation of residential squatting enforced by the *Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act* (2012). See also <http://www.squatter.org.uk/squatters-handbook/> [accessed 22nd March 2013].

[...] we want to try and link to local and broader struggles that are happening in Hackney around issues like the coming cuts, housing, employment, gentrification, supermarket invasion etc. There will also be a FreeZone, where you can bring what you don't need any more [sic] and take what you need; an InfoLibrary with literature available about various political subjects; promoting and defending squatting; skill-sharing etc.

[...]

We are open from midday-6pm on Sundays and Mondays, and from midday-8pm on Tuesdays, as an info-shop, free-shop and open space. At other times we are available for meetings and workshops. We have an open meeting every Monday evening from 7pm for anyone wishing to get involved and/or propose an event.¹²⁹

This call to participate framed the space and presented the intentions of the collective within the discursive space of urban social movements. The posting was addressed to activist and other individuals involved in countercultural spaces of organising, radical education and urban social movement and defined the space as an open resource, through the Infoshop and the free-shop, where to swap books, clothes and equipment, and as an open space where to socialise and learn about other groups and projects. The text also explained the difference between 'open days' and other times of the week when meetings and workshops could take place in the space behind closed doors, something that was particularly important for groups working on sensitive issues such as, for instance, organising protests through direct action, offering legal advice or running co-counselling closed sessions around gender identity issues. Finally, the statement set a regular meeting time and date when interested people could propose events or become involved in the general running of the space.

Juggling unlawful temporalities

The experiences of accessing shops of Make-Do, the Centre for Possible Studies and Studio at the Elephant analysed so far involved extensive negotiations

¹²⁹ OffMarket, OFFMARKET, a new squatted open space in Hackney, London, posted on *Indymedia London*, 23rd January 2011 [accessed 12th June 2011]. Word of mouth, internal mailing lists of other social centres and text messages (on phone tree lists linked to previous spaces) were also used to alert people in the activist scene.

with local authorities and property owners. In contrast to those, the occupation of the OffMarket shop fronts involved a form of direct reclaim, which however took place within a regulated and negotiated legal framework. Until September 2012, in England and Wales the occupation of empty properties was a civil matter, regulated by the Criminal Law Act of 1977. As long as the squatters publicly declared knowledge of the right to claim the space as their primary home, and as long as there were no evident signs of criminal damage to the property, the space was theoretically secured from unlawful evictions by landlords without a civil court verdict, and from police raids. In practice, however, the boundaries of legalities associated with squats were constantly tested by eviction attempts and police interventions, and knowledge of squatters' right needed to be actively and consciously performed over and over.¹³⁰

In April 2011, a vacant carpet depot on Valentine Road, on the street opposite the place where Well Furnished would open a few months later, was occupied to run a meeting of the Squattastic network.¹³¹ As I was sitting with a friend outside the building, a police car with three policemen and a policewoman arrived at full speed, and parked in front of the building. The activists inside quickly locked themselves in and began liaising with the officers through a small opening in the door. The officers were wearing bulletproof vests and stood with legs wide open, the hands under their vests, shoulders square and chin up.¹³² They told the activists indoors that they had been alerted that a property had been broken into and threatened to charge them with burglary as they had 'no way to know that they were squatters'. After about half an hour of negotiations and threats the incident was resolved when one of the activists inside slipped through the door a self-adhesive piece of paper on which had been printed a 'Section 6 notice' [fig. 4.7], and one of the activists outside physically stuck it onto the shutter. Before leaving, the officers reprimanded the squatters for wasting their time and cautioning them to take care with their notice next time.

¹³⁰ Together with a handful of other squatted social centres the second shop occupied by the OffMarket was raided by the London Metropolitan police on the eve of the Royal Wedding in April 2011, but the raid had to be justified under the Terrorist Act.

¹³¹ Since 2011 (ongoing, 2013) under the name of Squattastic have been run a series of meetings and events across England for collectives to share information and celebrate squatting projects against the ongoing criminalisation campaigns, see <http://squattastic.blogspot.co.uk/> [accessed 11th March 2013].

¹³² They asked us briskly to move away as we had 'no business' there, to which we replied that that was a public space and we had right of way, so we stayed to observe the scene. Diary note, 4th April 2011.

LEGAL WARNING

Section 6 Criminal Law Act 1977
As amended by Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994

TAKE NOTICE

THAT we live in this property, it is our home and we intend to stay here.

THAT at all times there is at least one person in this property.

THAT any entry or attempt to enter into this property without our permission is a *criminal offence* as any one of us who is in physical possession is opposed to entry without our permission.

THAT if you attempt to enter by violence or by threatening violence *we will prosecute you*. You may receive a sentence of up to *six months imprisonment* and/or a *fine* of up to *£5,000*.

THAT if you want to get us out you will have to issue a claim in the County Court or in the High Court, or produce to us a written statement or certificate in terms of S.12A Criminal Law Act, 1977 (as inserted by Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994).

THAT it is an offence under S.12A (8) Criminal Law Act 1977 (as amended) to knowingly make a false statement to obtain a written statement for the purposes of S. 12A. A person guilty of such an offence may receive a sentence of up to *six months imprisonment* and/or a *fine* of up to *£5,000*.

Signed

The Occupiers

N.B. Signing this Legal warning is optional. It is equally valid whether or not it is signed.

Figure 4.7 Standard Section 6 Notice (now outdated) from the Advisory Service for Squatters website www.squatter.org.uk/ [accessed 13th July 2012].

The display of a Section 6 Notice on the OffMarket shops served the main purpose of stating to the property owner and to the police that the collective was aware of their rights, thus protecting both occupiers and users from potential confrontations, while at the same time setting into motion the process of civil court proceeding, which set the temporal and legal limits of the squats.¹³³ In the case of their first site, the collective was ‘served papers’, which meant that they were officially summoned to defend themselves in the civil court, three weeks after they first opened to the public on 23rd January 2011. As the case was brought to a county court, the squatters estimated around a month of autonomy: at least two weeks until the hearing and the ruling, which almost invariably would be in favour of the owner,

¹³³ Source: conversations with activists and participant observation during January and February 2011.

and at least one week before possession would be sought by bailiffs.¹³⁴ The collective left the space voluntarily in early March 2011 a few days before the expected eviction date, and quickly relocated to a second shop a few meters away from the first one.

The second OffMarket space followed a similar timeframe. It was open to the public between April and late June 2011, when the collective lost the court case, and was brutally evicted on 7th July 2011. As in many squatted social spaces across the city, the temporariness of the occupation was assumed as inevitable, and the rationale for its location was grounded in a survival strategy based on project-based flexibility. In public debates around social centres, the spatial and temporal precariousness of squatted social centres is sometimes taken as a necessary evil in order to maintain complete autonomy from capitalist spatial dynamics. Precariousness is taken by some activists and squatters as a marker of radical antagonism in contrast to the 'compromise' made by urban activist spaces that seek tenancies or outright ownership in order to maintain spatial continuity.¹³⁵

Long-term urban activists involved in spatial struggles tend to critique such a purist 'uncompromising' stance not only as dogmatic and divisive, but also, importantly, as oblivious to the hybrid economic and organisational dynamics that sustain radical political spaces in contemporary Western cities. In the course of my observations of the squatting scene, such hybridity was apparent for instance in the day-to-day reliance of squatted spaces on 'safe houses' and on rented or owned radical spaces in order to store valuable pieces of equipment (such as video projectors, computers and bulky items) in case of sudden evictions.¹³⁶ The reliance on a solidarity network of 'less pure' more permanent spaces thus seemed necessary to guarantee support and a safety net for a community constantly on the move. Instead of assuming the alterity of the OffMarket based on its legal status, therefore,

¹³⁴ From the standpoint of squatters, the main differences between County Court and High Court proceedings is the timeframe, which is much shorter in the latter case. Depending on the officers, it is sometimes possible to be notified beforehand the day and time when the bailiff would seek possession. This is usually arranged in order to avoid damage to the property and to allow the squatters to move out with their possessions.

¹³⁵ See the debate referenced in the text 'All and Nothing: for radical suicide! Towards some Notes and Confusion on *You Can't Rent Your Way Out Of A Social Relationship: A Critique of Rented Social Centres*, 2006, <http://www.56a.org.uk/rent.html> [accessed 26th June 2010]. See also Social Center Network, editor 2007: *What's this place? Stories from radical social centers in the UK & Ireland*. Leeds: Autonomous Geographies.

¹³⁶ Such as the rented 56a Infoshop in Elephant and Castle, Southwark; LARC (London Action Resource Center), a owned resource centre in a shop front in Aldgate, and the owned Freedom Bookshop in Whitechapel, both in the Borough of Tower Hamlets.

in the following section I address the question of autonomy from a detailed analysis of the diverse economies and forms of organising that enabled such a temporary project to exist.

‘Free’ economies and participation

As the name OffMarket indicates, the question of autonomy from capitalist market relations was central to the aims and forms of sustenance of the project, which presented itself as a prefigurative example of re-appropriating and collectivising wasted resources such as long-term vacant spaces, clothes, books and food. Social evening and regular open cafes, for instance, offered vegan meals and snacks prepared from ‘skipped’ food, i.e. food found in skips and bins outside markets, restaurants and supermarkets. To encourage the recycling of wasted food, in each occupied space there was a street map of London with a list of accessible sites and tips for skipping and dumpster diving. A similar recycling logic was used in running the weekly bicycle repair workshops, where spare parts were reused and readapted, and volunteers and users could swap skills and make collective use of donated tools. A central activity of the social centre was an area called ‘freeshop’ or ‘freezone’ where clothes, tools, books, shoes and other objects could be donated, taken for free or swapped.

The autonomy of the space was dependent on a wide support infrastructure of places and people whose livelihoods and living arrangements were to a certain degree compliant to capitalist urban dynamics, and in the day to day running of the space, its ‘freeconomy’ too was characterised by mixed diverse economies of monetary and non-monetary exchanges.¹³⁷ The freeshop, for instance, was taken to embody a non-monetary economy of excess, where the surplus of a consumerist society could be redistributed and allocated according to needs and desires. In practice, it relied on degrees of voluntary labour and solidarity actions beyond the shifts in the space, since the donated clothes often needed washing, which meant that

¹³⁷ Following Gibson-Graham’s deconstruction of the discursive and material production of capitalist narrative, it is possible to be attentive to the non-monetised productive elements in contemporary urban economies and to show their implication in monetised capitalist forms of value production and exchange. See Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006 (1996): *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): a feminist critique of political economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. xiii.

volunteers and users would bring them home or spend their own money to wash them in the local launderette.

While space was reclaimed through direct action, the collective was careful to set up and pay utility bills, such as electricity and water, through monetary donations, since refusal to do so would have provided grounds for arrest under charges such as ‘extraction of electricity’.¹³⁸ The ‘donation box’, however, was usually hidden from the public when the space was open for the freeshop or the bicycle repair workshops. It was collectively agreed that visitors and users should not be encouraged to give money in exchange for the objects they were taking or for their use of tools, as that would have undermined the basis of freeconomy and mutual aid.¹³⁹ If anyone insisted to make to a donation, the volunteers encouraged users to bring supplies for the ‘tea corner’, such as dry biscuits, sugar, milk or tea bags, for the benefit of volunteers and other users of the space. Usually at the beginning of open door shifts the ‘tea corner’ had to be replenished by volunteers or by members of the core collective and this implicitly assumed a shared ability to contribute one or two pounds a week to the running of the space.

After moving from the first to the second space, the project had attracted volunteers with very different income levels, some of whom had complex stories of long-term unemployment and relied on welfare support, about which they often showed anxiety.¹⁴⁰ During one of my first shifts in the space, for instance, I overheard a regular volunteer, an unemployed woman in her forties, mentioning to another volunteer that she couldn’t buy a sixty pence pint of milk every shift anymore because “at the end of the week it all adds up”.¹⁴¹ Just as the freeshop was never depleted, the tea corner was always equipped with milk and tea bags, but the verbalised agreement that the tea corner would be the responsibility of all volunteers, which generated her explanation, was actually underwritten by an unspoken assumption that those who could should contribute more.

¹³⁸ See for instance the advice provided by <http://www.squatter.org.uk/for-new-squatters/squatting-made-less-simple/> [accessed 11th November 2012].

¹³⁹ See OffMarket 2011: *A little guide to OffMarket*, page unnumbered.

¹⁴⁰ This became clear when the space received the eviction notice from the courts, and many felt unable to participate in forms of resistance, even if through a peaceful picket, because they were afraid their welfare support might be withdrawn by Hackney Council in retaliation. Notes from Monday 20th June.

¹⁴¹ Diary entry, 31st May 2011.

Volunteers and users did not confine their contribution to the space to donations and helping to run the space, they were also involved in the organisation and programming of events and activities. In terms of its self-organisation, the space worked on a permeable three-tier system. There was a core collective of people who were most intensively involved; a crew of regular volunteers committed to regular activities in the space; and finally individuals or groups who used the space for specific one-off events, such as an external meeting or film screenings.¹⁴² Decisions regarding the programme and the running of the space were taken during the weekly open meeting on Monday evening, and involved the core collective, volunteers and anyone who wanted to propose new activities or events. In that case the decision would be made by consensus among the people present and one member of the core collective on rotation would take responsibility to check availability, liaise for access and promote the activity through the weekly newsletter.¹⁴³ Since the participants to the space had different levels of experience in collective management, beside the weekly meetings new information and the coordination of activities relied largely on written texts, from signs on the walls to booklets for volunteers, and at the end of each shift, volunteers were encouraged to log positive and negative events, messages and questions into a 'Day Book', in order to ensure open communication.¹⁴⁴

In relation to their dual aim to be an activist hub and to be connected with the community, in the words of a member of the core collective the OffMarket was "a very successful social centre, very open to the community", by which he intended open to local residents not involved in the squatters/activist scene.¹⁴⁵ At the end of the project the OffMarket collective announced in an *Indymedia* post that:

In the few months we got out of the space we managed to do some amazing things. Tons of workshops and regular activities, resources that allowed dozens of people to start their own squats, a hugely successful freeshop that ended up being run mostly by locals.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Members of the core collective's tasks included: writing and distributing the weekly email newsletter, checking and responding to the space's emails, meeting and training volunteers, ensuring that the space was clean and safe, and managing the occupation rota which sometimes could also involve individuals from the volunteer crew.

¹⁴³ Diary entry, 14th February 2011.

¹⁴⁴ OffMarket, *A little guide to OffMarket*.

¹⁴⁵ Conversation with a former member of the OffMarket collective, 14th April 2012.

¹⁴⁶ 'Offmarket: evicted space, project still alive!', *Indymedia London*, 12th July 2011, <http://london.indymedia.org/articles/9544> [accessed 10th September 2011].

It is important to analyse carefully such claims of success and openness to local communities not simply as users but as active participants in running activities in shop front. Who are the ‘locals’ mentioned in this statement? What were their motivations for volunteering in a squatted shop front? How did the organisers facilitate the participation of individuals external to the squatters and activist communities? These questions will inform my further discussion of the OffMarket in Chapter 5, which will focus on strategies and tensions of engendering ‘publicness’ through community-oriented temporary shop front reuse.

The projective materialities of reuse

Through analysing four distinct experiences of temporary vacant shop reuse across four inner London Boroughs, this chapter has attempted to attend to the complex materialities of temporary reuse and to identify important legal, economic and organisational differences as well as similarities.¹⁴⁷ In terms of negotiating access to vacant shops, for instance, each project can be seen to shed light on different but interconnected issues. In the case of Make-Do, the central difficulty encountered by the project was its temporal framework. Despite being supported by an intermediary, Meanwhile Space, and an ad-hoc scheme run by a local authority that was considered a pioneer of local government schemes of temporary reuse, the delay in accessing the space caused a series of organisational difficulties and ultimately led to the project ending four weeks earlier than initially expected. Mariana’s account revealed a discrepancy between the narrative of pop-ups as quick interventions in the city, and the longer temporalities and negotiations required to gain access and to bring together a cohesive group of volunteers.

The enforced temporariness of their stay in each shop was also an important barrier to the Centre for Possible Studies’ activities. Despite the fact that the Serpentine Gallery had a proven record of engagement with institutions and organisations locally, as well as sufficient funding to support changes of use and

¹⁴⁷ I was often reminded by participants in my research of the great differences between the four projects. Studio at the Elephant practitioners, for instance, were puzzled by my decision to research a fully-funded institutional project such as the Centre for Possible Studies, in the same breadth as their own short-term self-organised project. Similarly, activists involved in squatted social centres could not see the grounds of comparison with pop-up projects that functioned within pre-established frameworks of place marketing. The reasons for such a comparison are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

light refurbishment, in its first two locations the Centre was unable to effectively secure long-term leases. In the case of both shops, the reason for the vacancies, and the temporal horizon of the Centre's rent-free leases, indicated dynamics of commercial gentrification encouraged by the two landowners. The former tenant of the Porchester Place hairdresser was directly displaced through a rent increase;¹⁴⁸ the shops and restaurants on the lower floor of Marble Arch House, at 64 Seymour Street, were forced to leave space to a large redevelopment plan. The vacant state of both shops is not therefore to be understood a symptom of urban decay 'to be regenerated' nor as an effect of the recession, but as the result of a heightened pace of refurbishment and redevelopment in Westminster, in which well-established retailers and restaurants are pushed out to make space for a more upmarket retail (and residential) offer. The example of the two shops used by the Centre could indicate a process of re-gentrification at the heart of a wealthy area of inner London, in the case of Marble House through a process of demolition and 'new-build gentrification',¹⁴⁹ which a more in-depth and longitudinal analysis could consider as evidence of a larger super-gentrification tendency in the borough.¹⁵⁰

Despite the institutional support behind Make-Do and the Centre for Possible Studies, access to the space rent-free was crucial to both projects' sustainability, and the negotiations that relied substantially on personal connections, as seen also in the case of Studio at the Elephant. When practitioners described the lengthy and complex processes of searching for a suitable property and of promoting their projects in communications with the owners or the managers of the space, they also narrated a process of exploration and discovery of urban dynamics of decay and redevelopment in inner city London, and of the role of temporary projects at the intersection of public and private landowners' interests. The activity of looking for a vacant shop became thus not only a moment of research into the mechanisms of vacancy and its relation to commercial gentrification and redevelopment, but also a moment of self-reflection on the role ascribed to artists and cultural projects by

¹⁴⁸ Marcuse, P. 1985: 'Gentrification, abandonment and displacement: connections, causes and policy responses in New York City', *Journal of Urban and Contemporary Law* 28, pp. 195–240. As referenced and discussed by Slater, T. 2009: Missing Marcuse: On gentrification and displacement. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 13, pp. 292–311.

¹⁴⁹ Davidson, M. and Lees, L. 2009: New-build gentrification: its histories, trajectories, and critical geographies. *Population, Space and Place* 16, pp. 395–411.

¹⁵⁰ Butler, T. and Lees, L. 2006: Super-gentrification in Barnsbury, London: globalization and gentrifying global elites at the neighbourhood level. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31, pp. 467–487.

different urban players, from the funders to the stakeholders in a regeneration plan. The experience of the OffMarket, in contrast, stemmed from a tradition of direct action and antagonism to the ownership of private property and from knowledges, shared across urban social movements, of unlawful temporary occupations in direct opposition to the enforced spatial scarcity created by market dynamics.

With the sole exception of the Centre for Possible Studies, which employed two full time coordinators and had a budget for programming, all projects relied on a combination of economic arrangements including small funds, donations, in-kind support and plenty of voluntary labour. Such arrangements were made possible partially through prior knowledge of existing organisations and support networks, and partially through practitioners' activities in the space, which enabled them to access local organisations and businesses. As seen in the case of Make-Do, the process of mapping existing stakeholders is grounded in the understanding that a community-led project cannot be launched without preliminary knowledge of the social and institutional dynamics that inform it. Local connections fed into the process of justifying the rationale of the temporary projects and of supporting practitioners' claim of opening up spaces for the community. Connecting with existing institutions, networks and communities became both a moment of understanding local resources and an important moment of encountering and making themselves visible to potential participants in their project.

By addressing the labour of organising support and coordinating volunteers, this chapter revealed issues around funding and short-term temporalities that characterise the important differences between unfunded self-organised pop-ups and institutionally backed projects in London. Practitioners needed to be able to move into a space at very short notice and to commit for a very intensive period, and the differences of engagement discussed in the case of Make-Do and Studio at the Elephant showed how such commitment was possible only for individuals whose work and living situations were very flexible, such as part-time, self-employed or precarious workers on short-term contracts.¹⁵¹ Practitioners in vacant space reuse have been shown as capable to mobilise at short notice networks of volunteers and resources without which their self-organised projects of reuse could never exist,

¹⁵¹ The labour conditions in the cultural sector appeared to suit particularly well the flexibility demanded by temporary empty space reuse, which may partly explain why the 'creative use' encouraged to fill vacant shops is often pragmatically translated into 'art', as seen in Chapter 3.

although a close reading of these diverse economies revealed complex landscapes of unpaid labour and mixed source income which warrant a note of caution with regards to facile assumptions of alterity. In fact, the lack of proper funding in some of the projects excluded participants, while others had to “scramble to subsidize their own exploitation”, as put by Richard Lloyd in his analysis of contemporary cultural work.¹⁵²

In the case of the OffMarket, while the collective was able to determine when to occupy a site, their permanence in the space was still dependent on shared strategies of dealing with the legal implications of their direct action. Similarly, the economies and forms of work that sustained the space combined different sources, and the mechanisms of self-management and self-sustenance were more structured and the object of a greater degree of openness than was the case for the other projects. Reflections on labour and diverse economies thus challenged the idea that short-term reuse sits at the antipodes of mainstream labour and economic dynamics, and seems on the contrary to indicate combinations of different precarious strategies drawing on a range of resources, some of which were shown to generate tensions and resentment.

In analysing the materialities of temporary projects of reuse, there is therefore an important relationship to be drawn between reticular forms of labour and *the project* as a site of connectivity for networks of practitioners and activists whose work is not spatially determined. The idea of creating ‘hubs’ and of ‘bringing together’ different communities through spatial occupation indicated an awareness of the flexibility that characterises cultural and activist communities in London. The ‘projective logic’ of the four practices analysed in the course of this chapter can be seen as rooted practitioners and activists’ recognition of their own urban precariousness. From such an understanding originates their rationale for creating temporary common platforms to connect with each other and to share resources. The self-organised examples explored in this chapter show ingenuity and strategies to ‘Make-Do’ with economic and temporal constraints through the mobilisation of

¹⁵² Lloyd, R. 2004: The Neighborhood in Cultural Production: Material and Symbolic Resources in the New Bohemia. *City & Community* 3, pp. 343-372. See also the work of Adam Arvidsson’s analysis of emerging practices of urban event organising in Denmark, according to whom the urban creative sector is based on the unpaid work of “creative proletarians” (p.21), managed and appropriated by a few network entrepreneurs for whom “the urban environment comes to constitute a positive externality that can be grasped and valorised”, Arvidsson, A. 2007: Creative Class or Administrative Class? On Advertising and the ‘Underground’. *Ephemera* 7, pp. 8-23.

extensive social networks and a range of source of support and potential funds. It is, however, important to distinguish critically between understanding such projects as examples of a burgeoning urban 'civic economy' capable of establishing sustainable alternative and autonomous social and economic infrastructures, and as the result of temporary coping strategy for dealing with uncertainty and impermanence.

In the course of this chapter I have explored how practitioners often narrate the origins of their projects as grounded in site-specific observations of existing communities and places. While such narratives are used to perform an authentic engagement with place, it is important to address critically the extent to which scoping observations are also instrumental to gaining local support and to accessing spaces and resources. In other words, the establishment of relationships with local residents and institutions can be seen both as an aspiration to widening participation and as a practical strategy to initiate and sustain a temporary project. There is a tension here between a model of temporary community-oriented projects that is reproducible across different places and times, and the uniqueness of place-specific relationships. As revealed by the experience of the Studio at the Elephant practitioner, attachment to place can prove detrimental to one's career and to the ability to move on to another project.

Looking at dynamics of vacancy and the possibilities of accessing space rent-free, a critical examination of this projective logic is also important to understand the interplay between flexible strategies of occupation and the framework within which such spaces are granted. The demand on practitioners for temporal abundance, intensity and flexibility, as they accept delays and sudden deadlines on which they have no control, was often paired with an inflexible temporal closure of their deployment. In celebrating such projects as forms of urban ingenuity and spatial re-appropriation, it is easy to forget that they also embody forms of temporal foreclosure as the use of the vacant spaces is granted on the assumption that the reclaim will be short-lived, and that the temporariness will be dependant upon the interest of property owners and managers. The projective logic of temporary reuse as a short-term flexible form of occupation thus appeared particularly suited to situations of temporary vacancy awaiting large-scale redevelopment, such as in the case of the Centre for Possible Studies and Studio at the Elephant. The projective logic of temporary reuse and the intersection between short-term reuse and patterns

of flexible and precarious labour can thus have important effects on the political implications of temporary ‘community-oriented’ projects.¹⁵³

In terms of the types of labour required by practices of temporary reuse, coordinating and networking are central activities for organising temporary shop front reuse. The ability of participants to engage at short notice, to connect and to be mobile, became, for some of the experiences under examination, the positive normative for participants and users of the space, which often proved exclusionary to participants. As seen with the Make-Do project, the inability of practitioners to connect with young people from a homeless shelter was a sobering example of the exclusionary dynamics of temporary spaces coordinated by highly educated, connected and mobile subjects trying to involve less connected communities.¹⁵⁴ By offering a situated critical materialist analysis of the conditions and arrangements of vacant shop reuse in inner London, in this chapter I have tried to address and articulate the ‘projective’ implications of urban temporariness and its effects on practitioners’ claim of creating platforms open to other users. In the self-reflexive accounts of practitioners and coordinators, the narrative of vacant spaces as wasted resources to be offered for free to ‘the community’ has been contrasted to the temporal dynamics of engagement, which often revealed a complex terrain of outreach and negotiation.

In order to assess practitioners’ reflections on the significance of their projects and their effectiveness to facilitate public encounters, it is now necessary to address the question of the relationship between temporary shop front use and its ‘publics’ through detailed and fine grained day-to-day observations of the types and quality of encounters occurring across a temporarily occupied shop. In Chapter 5 I therefore focus my attention on the potentials and limitations of practices of temporary vacant shop front reuse to engender and facilitate alternative urban encounters. Drawing on in-depth participant observations of two practices, Studio at the Elephant and the OffMarket, I will analyse the processes through which claims of publicness and openness are discursively and practically negotiated by

¹⁵³ As noted by Claire Bishop in relation to participatory art, the rise of the notion of artistic ‘projects’ could be seen as a manifestation of the collapse of ‘grand narrative’ politics after 1989, see ‘Chapter 7: Western art and the project’, in her 2012: *Artificial hells: participatory art and politics of spectatorship*. London: Verso.

¹⁵⁴ The social justice issue of exclusion and exploitation are central in Boltanski and Chiapello’s discussion of the ‘projective city’ and its leftist critique, see ‘The resurgence of the social critique: from exclusion to exploitation’, in the authors’ 2005: *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, pp. 346-355.

practitioners. To do so I will pay attention to the explicit and implicit ways of addressing their ‘publics’ through texts, images and ‘scripted’ forms of one-to-one engagement with passers-by and audiences. A combination of conversations and observations will enable me to explore critically the expectations and tensions that arise from such processes of framing and addressing, and their relationship to the different imaginaries of vacant space reuse discussed in Chapter 3. In the case of Studio at the Elephant, practitioners’ efforts to produce a visible performance of activity in formerly vacant shops will be analysed in relation to other local temporary projects and to a set of public and private agendas specific to the Shopping Centre and to the Elephant and Castle area.

The following chapter will also expand on the focus developed in this chapter on material conditions and forms of labour of temporary reuse, by paying attention to the embodied, emotional and affective dimensions of openness and publicness. Opening a formerly vacant shop to the public demands extensive facilitation and performance skills. Practitioners’ experiences of negotiating bodily presence can engender highly emotional personal relationships, which I argue constitute a central and potentially transformative dimension of practices of temporary urban reuse. Practitioners’ desire to facilitate and perform alternative relations to vacant spaces will therefore be addressed in their potential openness to unexpected urban encounters and to the thick and conflictive emotional geographies of appropriating and sharing space.

Chapter 5

Performative public encounters across the shop floor

‘I wonder – everybody here on the block wonders – why are you here?’¹

As analysed in the previous chapter, the work associated with occupying a temporary shop for open social uses is not limited to a visual ‘filling’ of the space, but involves extensive programming and coordination to turn the space into a platform for public use. As examined in Chapter 1, recent critical urban theory has interpreted temporary reuse as a form of place branding, by drawing attention to the ways in which the public staging of social interaction is harnessed by urban regeneration agendas and easily assimilated to dynamics of cultural gentrification. In the course of Chapter 3, I have argued that the logic of the pop-up shops fad is informed by notions of experiential and ‘immersive’ marketing, transferred to rapid urban policies addressing vacancy in times of recession. Without neglecting the powerful forces that inform the discursive and material conditions of practices of reuse, which have been analysed in Chapter 4, it is important to populate this critical reading with an attention to the embodied ways in which vibrant public occupations are performed on the ground, and to the ways in which audiences and users encounter and interpret the spaces. In order to do so, in this chapter I will turn my attention to the encounters engendered by practices of temporary occupation. What kinds of experiences and encounters are produced through community-oriented temporary shop fronts? Are they critical of, or compliant with, existing imaginaries of urban development? What are the emotional and affective ‘textures’ produced across the shop front?

To begin, this chapter will address the ‘staging’ of the experiential dimension of reuse and address the performative encouraging of access and use of a formerly vacant space. As discussed in the previous chapters, expectations about ‘creative’ and

¹ Response of a local resident when the artist collective Group Material (1979-1996) opened an exhibition and production space in a shop front in a black and Puerto Rican neighbourhood on Manhattan Lower East Side in the early 1980s, as recounted by Grant Kester. According to Kester, the exchange posed a direct challenge to the ‘community’ claims of the art space and showed “a rare glimpse of the complex negotiations that took place at this time across boundaries of race and class difference” which are often overlooked by accounts that are only concerned with practitioners’ stated intentions and aim. It is important to note that this exchange was related by a member of Group Material as the trigger that made the collective close the shop and decide to work more intensively in the community without having a site. Kester, G.H. 2004: *Conversation pieces: community and communication in modern art*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 124.

'community' temporary shops can lead to misunderstandings and frictions between lawful practitioners and property owners. Even without explicit censorship, there are elements of implicit adjustment and vetting of what could be displayed or which activities could be carried out inside a shop. These frictions and adjustments can often be invisible to external observers since, as argued by Laura Levin and Kim Solga, "many of the spaces marketed as public and universally accessible by the creative city [...] embed various restrictions to access that are downplayed in their promotion".²

While the 'experiential economy' logic discussed in Chapter 1 might inform decision-making at the level of coordinating a public image of temporary reuse, however, the practices and social interactions that occur through the temporary occupation of a shop front may exceed and consciously disrupt the implicit or explicit roles assigned to audience and participants. The experience of opening a vacant shop front to the public creates spaces of public encounter and interaction that can pose challenges to the normative 'official' logic of temporary use. At the same time, in the case of more autonomous spaces, such as squatted shop fronts, the performance of openness can also be informed by expectations of types of use and behaviours, and activists too can find themselves negotiating tensions and boundaries of publicness. Only by attending to these embodied interactions, and to the self-reflective accounts of practitioners and users involved in specific projects - their frustrations, joys and desires - is it possible to address the effects of these 'experiential' framings, and the potential challenges brought about by public encounters.

Secondly, as discussed in the previous chapter, gaining access to a vacant shop and keeping its doors open does not in itself make a formerly vacant space 'public'.³ Here it is useful to think about the public or publics of projects of temporary vacant space reuse as 'emergent' rather than as a pre-defined entity to be

² Levin, L. and K. Solga 2009: Building Utopia: Performance and the Fantasy of Urban Renewal in Contemporary Toronto. *The Drama Review* 53, p. 45.

³ The question of what constitutes 'public spaces' is central to debates in critical geography and urban studies, where 'public space' is understood as the result of spatial processes and struggles, rather than as a given space designated by planners or by a homogeneous definition of public and public use. See for instance, Kurt Iveson's privileging of *procedural* over *topographical* approaches to public spaces, and its implications for forms of urban spatial politics, see Iveson, K. 2007: *Publics and the city*. Oxford: Blackwell.

reached.⁴ Temporary community-oriented projects thus need to be addressed through the ways in which they constitute publics, and in so doing make their spaces public, through performative processes of address, articulation, summoning and use.⁵ An emphasis on processes of emergence attempts to “attend closely to the events, practices and processes through which publics come into view, sustain themselves over time and extend themselves over space”.⁶ Addressing publics as emergent brings into view “the importance of attending to the mediating practices through which some issues, and not others, are made into objects of public action through the agency of particular subjects and in particular registers”.⁷

The performative processes of summoning, engendering and sustaining publics rely on processes of mediation and modes of self-legitimizing, which are especially important given the unconventional sites where practices of reuse take place. Open shops that do not sell any product can cause puzzlement and suspicion, requiring extensive explanations. A performative understanding of publicness needs to address the processes of co-production of space and its meanings by practitioners, participants and passers-by. By looking closely at the moment of questioning the presence of an art or activist space, at the interaction in the moment of encounter, it will therefore be possible to understand the processes of claim-making and justifications which articulate the position of practitioners in relation to urban dynamics, but which also reveal issues of contention and frictions arising from dialogues between practitioners, users and passers-by across the shop front. As suggested by Mahony et al., “processes of mediation bring into view the different

⁴ Clive Barnett, ‘Emergent Publics’, paper presentation at the workshop Creating Publics - Research Policy Event, University of Westminster, London, 21st July 2011. Barnett draws his three-fold distinction between *residual*, *dominant* and *emergent* formations from Raymond Williams’ *Marxism and Literature* (1977) where the emergent is associated “with a sensitivity to thinking about the newness of new forms as full of contingent potential”.

⁵ See Mahony, N., J. Newman, and C. Barnett 2010: *Rethinking the public: innovations in research, theory and politics*. Bristol: Policy. For a critical discussion of process-based publicness it is also important to remember the debates around the politics of public art projects and the critique of the separation practitioner-audience in new genre public art, as briefly discussed in Chapter 1. See Deutsche, R. 1998: *Evictions: art and spatial politics*, Cambridge: MIT Press. See also Miles, M. 1997: *Art Space and the City: Public art and urban futures*. London: Routledge.

⁶ Mahony, Newman, and Barnett, *Rethinking the public*, pp. 8-9.

⁷ The authors underline the importance of opening up analyses to the multiple ways in which publicness is practised or performed, its different rationalities and forms of mediation that inform the conditions of their emergence. Ibid., p. 169. The question of different understandings of the transactional rationalities of urban encounters and the communication and negotiation of difference has also been the focus of Gary Bridge’s recent reflections in his *Reason in the city of difference. Pragmatism, communicative action and contemporary urbanism* (2005).

forms of power that are at stake in the formation of publics”.⁸ This is particularly important to any understanding of the complex positionality of art practitioners and activists within the dense spatial politics of sites of urban transformation.

While the notion of performance leads to ideas of ‘staging’ experiences, it also opens up the possibility of unexpected encounters. Practitioners claiming to open spaces for public use can, through encounters, be confronted in their assumptions about the ‘public’ and the ‘local community’ in ways which would otherwise be disguised by “discourses of fun, play, discovery, and political progressiveness” that often surround imaginaries of temporary creative urban activities.⁹ In Levin and Solga’s analysis, the effects of these assumptions are “in many ways more meddlesome” than those created by the briefs of managers and property owners, “because they are not foremost about money”, but about more complex and specific spatial politics of visibility and about practitioners’ and activists’ own expectations.¹⁰ The focus on the moment of performative encounters will enable me to qualify the claims to ‘openness’ and ‘community-orientation’ of the projects and to attend to the delicate and complex operations of explaining, framing, encouraging and justifying that take place when practitioners encounter ‘the public’. Attending to these processes, and to the dialogues and frictions that arise at the moment of personal encounters, enables a critical, empirically grounded and positioned discussion of the potentials, emotional landscapes and difficulties of open community-oriented spaces as generative moments of production of publicness, where users and audiences can be seen as co-producers of these spaces.

Deploying a performative analysis of the public uses of space thus requires attending both to the ‘staging’ of the inhabitation of vacancy, and to the unpredictable dimension of performativity which demands attention to be paid to the transformative potential of unexpected embodied interaction. As discussed in Chapter 1, emotional and affective geographies are an important component to understand the city and its politics, and in this chapter I will address the affective and emotional dimensions of using, connecting and encountering through the shops. Drawing on practitioners’ recollection of their shifting emotional relations to the space and their projects, and on my own participant observations, these dimensions

⁸ Mahony, Newman, and Barnett, *Rethinking the public*, p. 172.

⁹ Levin and Solga, *Building Utopia*, p. 45.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 45-46.

will contribute to the theorisation of the social potential of temporary projects, as well as of its limits and boundaries.

In order to address both the negotiated boundaries of ‘openness’ and the performativity of practices of temporary reuse, I will begin by discussing in greater detail the staging of the Studio at the Elephant project within a broader ‘programme’ of art and community related temporary reuse in the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre. Following a discussion of the official narrative of the Centre’s representatives, I will examine experiences of publicness and conflicting encounters through temporary shop front activities. In-depth conversations with practitioners and reflections on my own participant observations bring into view the complex emotional landscapes that accompanied their presence in the Centre. In the last section, drawing upon my experience of staging openness and encountering ‘the public’ at the OffMarket, I will discuss a contrasting experience of explicitly political openness of the squatted shop. A detailed analysis of the often emotionally charged registers in which encounters and frictions are articulated will make possible to interrogate their potential for transformative action.

Experiential economies of temporary reuse in Elephant and Castle

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Studio at the Elephant project was able to negotiate rent-free access and minimal financial support thanks to the practitioners’ positive relationship with St Modwen, the real estate management and development company in charge of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre. In April 2010, the retail magazine *Shopping Centre* had showcased the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre as an example of ‘more creative ways of filling vacant space’ to counter the impact of the recession on shopping malls’ occupancy.¹¹ The author interviewed a representative of the Centre about the company’s strategy of bringing arts events to the vacant units in the centre. The representative stated: “we’re always on the lookout for local projects to fill up vacant space and bring life and creativity into the shopping centre”.¹² Before analysing in depth the

¹¹ Source: ‘Shopping centres look to more creative ways of filling vacant space’. *Shopping Centre*, 26th April 2010, http://www.shoppingcentre.co.uk/news/fullstory.php/aid/3490/Shopping_centres_look_to_more_creative_ways_of_filling_vacant_space.html [accessed 26th October 2010].

¹² Ibid.

performative and public dimensions of Studio at the Elephant, it is therefore important to examine and discuss in more detail the recent history of artistic pop-up in the Centre and practitioners' relationships to the property manager's agenda of 'bringing life and creativity' into the site.

The Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre is a three-floors mixed-use centre that combines retail, residential, offices space and leisure facilities, including a bingo hall and bowling venue that occupy the entirety of its top floor, various restaurants and cafes, a pub and a theatre and music venue. Several shop units on the upper ground floor also host front service offices of banks and building societies, of Southwark Council as well as of many community organisations and non-profit agencies. The centre was constructed in the early 1960s as the centrepiece of a large-scale publicly funded comprehensive redevelopment of area, which included a traffic gyratory system, 2km of pedestrian subways and the 1200-unit Heygate Estate that replaced pre-war tenement buildings in east Walworth.¹³ After years of semi-abandonment and lack of refurbishment, paralleling similar underinvestment in its adjacent council estates, the Shopping Centre became the focus of Southwark Council's redevelopment plans. In the 1990s the Council decided that the Centre was to be demolished, together with the adjacent Heygate Estate, to give space to a comprehensive regeneration of the area. The logic of the 1960s redevelopment, combined with high levels of public land ownership in the area, "meant that a comprehensive scheme became viewed as desirable and possible".¹⁴

The demolition of the centre, however, became an issue of contention in the long and conflictive public consultation around the regeneration plans. After a first attempt to develop a regeneration partnership with housing associations and community organisations came to an abrupt end in 2004, the Council decided to form a public-private partnership with private investors and developers.¹⁵ In 2007 the regeneration bid was won by a consortium of developers headed by the

¹³ Southwark Council n.d.: *Elephant and Castle: The shopping centre* www.elephantandcastle.org.uk/pages/consultation_dialogue/134/the_shopping_centre.html [accessed 3rd February 2012].

¹⁴ Wolff, N, 2010: Entrepreneurial development and socially progressive regeneration: mediating the conflicts of place at the Elephant and Castle, London [unpublished Master Thesis, UCL, Departmental Planning Unit, Bartlett School of Planning] pp. 22-23.

¹⁵ For a history of the two regenerations of the Elephant and Castle, see DeFilippis, J. and North, P. 2004: *The Emancipatory Community? Place, Politics and Collective Action in Cities*. In Lees, L. (ed.) *The Emancipatory City. Paradoxes and Possibilities*, London: Sage. See also Southwark Notes 2013: *Soundings: The Consultation Industry in the Elephant & Castle*. *Corporate Watch Magazine* online, 10th January 2013, <http://www.corporatewatch.org/?lid=4635> [accessed 22nd January 2013].

Australian real estate developer Lend Lease. One of the unsuccessful bidders was the owner and current manager of the centre, St Modwen Properties PLC.¹⁶ In the words of a shopping centre representative: “we made it to the final two, as redevelopment partners, and they selected Lend Lease, so we’ve been holding the Centre”.¹⁷ By holding the Centre, they have retained control of the centrepiece of the Opportunity Area, the core area designated by Southwark Council for regeneration [fig. 5.1].¹⁸

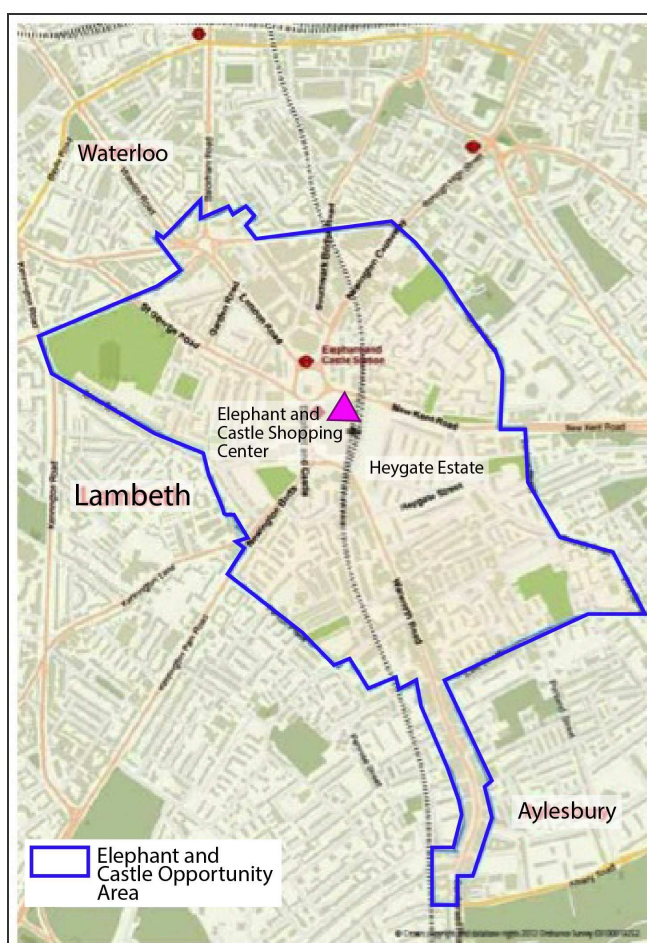


Figure 5.1 Map of the Elephant and Castle. Adapted from Southwark Council, 2012: Elephant and Castle Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) and Opportunity Area Planning Framework (OAPF), p. 9. The purple triangle marks the position of the Elephant and Castle Shopping centre.

With the financial and credit crisis of 2007/2008, plans for the redevelopment of the Elephant and Castle stalled, and negotiations about the regeneration scheme resumed only after local elections in May 2010, when the newly elected Labour

¹⁶ The purchase had taken place in 2002 when the company joined forces with Salhia Real Estate, through a joint venture company called Key Property Investments (KPI). *Source*: <http://www.stmodwen.co.uk/development/results/32/16/default/40> [accessed 21st October 2011].

¹⁷ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

¹⁸ See Southwark Council's *Elephant and Castle Supplementary Planning Document* 2011.

Council signed a regeneration agreement with Lend Lease.¹⁹ The agreement contemplated different options regarding the proposed demolition of the shopping centre, all of which left St Modwen in a strong negotiating position.²⁰ The period between summer 2010 and summer 2011, when Studio at the Elephant was running its two shop units, was therefore marked by uncertainty, feverish behind-the-stage negotiations and the ghost of stalled regeneration schemes all around the country as developers failed to raise credit and local authorities were hit by the first wave of budgetary cuts. Moreover, as explained by a representative of the shopping centre, the presence of the nearly decanted Heygate Estate added to negative perceptions of inactivity and danger in the area, and the perceptions of the centre tended to be negative:

it doesn't help having the Heygate sitting there empty, it gives that perception of inactivity... we want to create a busy, busy centre. Busy places tend to be safer places. And there is a strong perception about people not being safe around here.²¹

For the Centre's managers, the imperative was to counter perceptions of inactivity and create experiences of 'busyness'. This complex political and economic situation created the material and symbolic setting for a string of short-term artistic projects in vacant shops, which accompanied a strategy of short-letting shops as office spaces, keeping vacancy rates in the shopping centre very low.²²

¹⁹ Southwark Council and Lend Lease 2010: *Regeneration Agreement*, see <http://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/2013/02/04/council-leaks-southwark-lend-lease-confidential-regeneration-agreement/> [accessed 22nd April 2012].

²⁰ Three different options were possible. Two were that Lend Lease could purchase the site from KPI and redevelop it; or Southwark Council could begin the lengthy process for a compulsory purchase of the centre, and then lease it to Lend Lease for redevelopment. Both options required a high capital investment that neither Lend Lease nor the Council seemed inclined to make, and assumed that St Modwens/KPI would agree to sell, which seemed unlikely given the position of the site in a prime real estate location. In the third option, which ultimately prevailed, St Modwens/KPI would retain ownership and redevelop the site in collaboration with Lend Lease and Southwark Council, and in accordance with the regeneration guidelines of the area. Source: formal presentation by Lend Lease's representatives to the local community group Elephant Amenity Network, 15th February 2011. Plans were unveiled to the local media in May 2011 for a major refurbishment that was meant to "retain the existing building structure but extend both out and above, creating a transformed centre entirely unrecognisable to that which currently exists". Source: <http://www.stmodwen.co.uk/development/results/32/16/default/40> [accessed 11th October 2011].

²¹ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

²² Ibid. The representative argued that vacant units are not unusual in shopping centres and that the Elephant and Castle is performing better than the average and St Modwen's press releases boasts that "the property is currently an income-producing asset which continues to be close to 100% let, see also <http://www.stmodwen.co.uk/development/results/32/16/default/40> [accessed 15th October 2011]. Recent surveys by Southwark Council in 2009 and 2011 confirmed the claim that vacancy levels have been low in the centre, also since because "vacant units on the upper floor of the shopping centre have

Besides the uncertainty regarding the scheduled redevelopment of the site, the morphology of the centre too played an important role in the production of vacancy and in the proliferation of temporary shop reuse. The 1960s design of deep and narrow shop units favoured small retailers and makes it “difficult to attract the type of tenants that would also bring the people in”.²³ The same design, moreover, distributed the retail units over two floors, creating a spatial hierarchy between “the lower ground floor as [...] the stronger retail pitch”²⁴, with high street retailers; and a secondary trading space on the upper ground floor, which hosted mostly “local traders, people who live in the area and own their own shops. More ethnic [sic]. Quite a strong South American presence [...] a fantastic Polish restaurant [...] money transfer... it’s more like a traditional high street”.²⁵

Another important characteristic of the centre is its position as a connective space between the Elephant and Castle Southern railway station in the east, with a direct passage/entrance from the first floor, and the London underground station at the west end. The resulting east-west corridor is thus subjected to a flux of commuters, an estimated one million people a month, which however does not benefit those traders located along the upper ground floor’s longest points.²⁶ For this reason the upper ground floor “give[s] the impression of being quite inactive”.²⁷ For the Centre’s representative, the main rationale for cultural projects in vacant units was therefore to catch the attention of commuters:

I made a point when I came in here to say, what do we do with those units? Because when they sit empty they don’t reflect very well on the actual centre [...] [The main point is] getting these people to stop and look and say, oh look, there’s a shop here, and, there’s a vacant shop being used by community groups and offering different events, and, you know, both visually and audio,

been re-used as offices and storage space rather than remaining vacant, see Southwark Council's *Supplementary Planning Document* December 2011, baseline information point 3.6.

²³ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The north end of the upper ground floor is especially penalised by the presence of two large units, let to Tesco, which uses them as a training and office space, and that gives the impression of being vacant. Ibid. This area is the site of Studio at the Elephant’s second pop-up shop, which made sporadic use of the Tesco units for events such as a shadow puppet show on their opening night, and a film screening co-organised with Tate Modern’s film department, see Studio at the Elephant's online programme <http://studio.homefromhome-online.com/> [accessed 13th February 2012].

²⁷ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

people would stop and look and ‘oh, there’s things happening!’²⁸

The temporal uncertainty and the layout and morphology of the upper ground floor has favoured small, independent business, and community groups, more ready to accept flexible and short-term leases²⁹, so that over the last ten years the upper ground floor of the centre has been overwhelmingly characterised by affordable independent retailers and services owned by and serving the diverse local ethnic mix, especially its Latin American community. Predictably, the units along the north-south axis of the upper ground floor tended to have a high turnover of traders, and consequently higher vacancy rates, and became favoured sites for the vast majority of the temporary projects of reuse, as visible in figure 5.2.

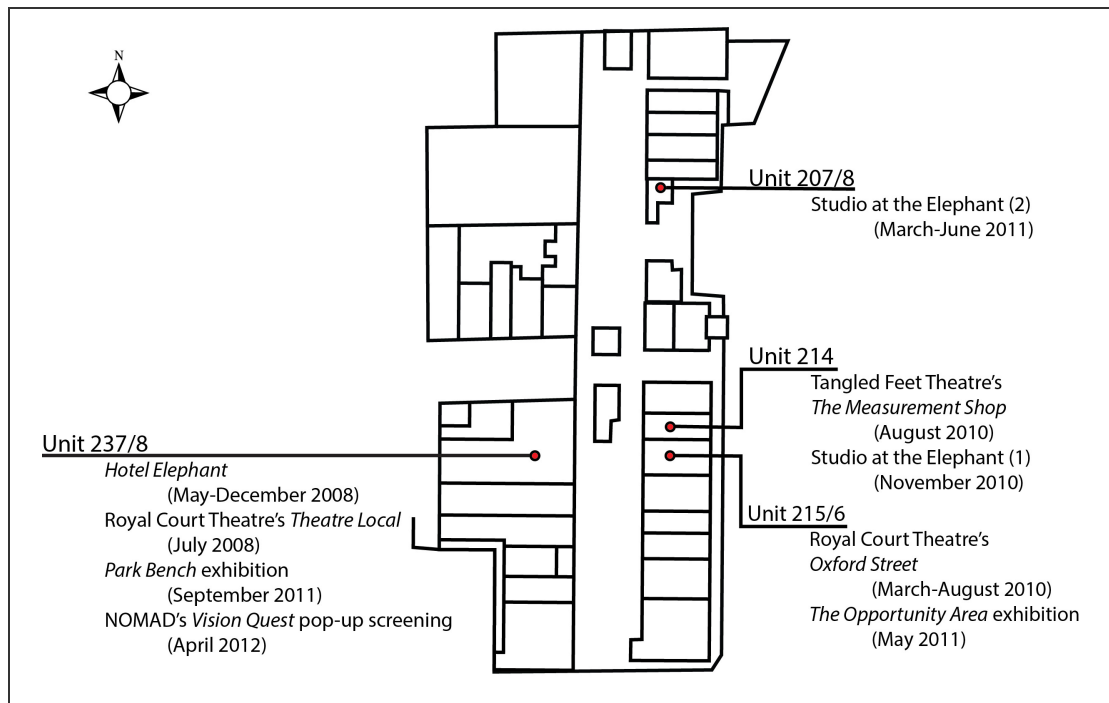


Figure 5.2 Map of cultural temporary shops in the Elephant and Castle shopping centre, upper floor. Adapted from Green and Black's floor plan October 2011, courtesy of St Modwen.

²⁸ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

²⁹ As explained by the Shopping Centre representative: “a lot of them are community groups that have funding for only a set period anyway, so they actually like the short term nature of the leases that we offer because if they went into a Westfield they would be getting a minimum of ten years [leases]”, Ibid. While the upper ground floor of the centre was officially presented as inactive and problematic, regular site visits between 2009 and 2011 revealed a great variety of small and often independent retailers and services: a dry cleaners, several money transfer/remittances shops, legal advice centres (such as Blackfriars Advice centre and Blooming Fields), several cafés, an IT and computer repair, a travel agents, a bank and a building society, a printing shop, an acupuncture and natural therapy shop, a burger bar, three restaurants (Indian, Colombian and Polish), a seamstress workshop, a one-pound shop and several smaller kiosks in the middle of the corridors, selling South American food products and coffee. The sitting areas of the cafés expands into the corridors, making the floor very lively during the day, while the restaurants at the two opposite ends of the floor have separate entrances that allow visitors to enter after the night time closure of the centre.

The shopping centre as a stage

Between 2008 and 2011 the corridors and vacant units on the upper floor were variously used by artists and community groups, and for the display of planning consultation materials.³⁰ An example of the typology of art-based ‘pop-up’ in the centre was the residency of local artist Reuben Powell in unit 238. The project was called *Hotel Elephant*, it ran intermittently from May 2008 until December 2008³¹, and consisted of using the shop as a workshop and exhibition space for his large scale charcoal drawings and paintings [fig. 5.3].



Figure 5.3 Screenshot of Hotel Elephant flyer, May 2008. Source: <http://hotelelephantgallery.blogspot.it/> [22nd March 2011].

The shop sits on the corner of the east-west corridor and two of its walls are

³⁰ For instance: Southwark Council’s *A to Z of Dance* “to experience dance in a variety of spaces across the two boroughs, including unusual and unexpected locations” (part of The Big Dance), a collaboration between the arts offices of Lambeth and Southwark Council. *A to Z of Dance Leaflet*, page unnumbered. See also www.lambeth.gov.uk/dance [accessed 12th March 2012]. The upper ground floor corridor also served as the stage of the annual fashion shows of the local start-up black culture and heritage youth group Set Fashion Free in 2008, 2009 and 2010. Source: Set Fashion Free website <http://www.setfashionfree.org.uk/index.htm> [accessed 12th March 2012]. See also field notes from site visits during the consultation for Southwark’s Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in October 2011.

³¹ See press releases on <http://hotelelephantgallery.blogspot.it/> [22nd March 2011]. The exhibition was also on the map of RIBA’s London Festival of Architecture (19 June - 31 July 2008) <http://www.lfa2008.org/> [accessed 22nd March 2011].

entirely made of glass, which makes it a perfect exhibition space, as noted by several other ‘pop-up’ artists.³² Powell’s landscape works, which centre on images of demolition and redevelopment of the Elephant and Castle area, were publicly bought by the developers Lend Lease, who were bidding for the regeneration of the area, and by Southwark Council, and are currently exhibited in the foyer of Southwark Council’s Town Hall in Tooley St. This double endorsement by the two most powerful agents in the area of his dark images of demolition and construction sites stirred some debate on local blogs and forums.³³

Unit 238 was to become a regular site for temporary projects and events: in June 2008, it was inhabited for a week by a Royal Court Theatre’s production of the play *Oxford Street*.³⁴ The centre’s representative explained how he had approached Paul Handley at the Royal Court Theatre:

I went and saw him at the theatre in Sloane square, and I thought, ‘wow, fantastic, beautiful theatre, beautiful location, but, demographically, architecturally, it couldn’t be further apart from the Elephant and Castle. You know, it’s Sloane Square! And he said, there have been some ideas of doing maybe some sort of engagement with local communities, maybe their actors teaching local kids or whatever. And they came down and they saw that unit there [...] 237-238, the PriceMark unit... that’s the first unit they used... and they fitted it out like a JD Sport, that sort of, because the play was actually set in a shop, so it was brilliant, and they did it facing outwards, so it was amazing. People were all sitting outside, looking in, it was exactly, exactly what we wanted to try and achieve.’³⁵

The description of the actual performance ‘facing outwards’ and with the audience ‘sitting outside, looking in’ is a powerful explanation of the kind of visual and aural busyness that the representatives were after.³⁶ As for the Royal Court’s rationale for being in the Elephant, the show was a central part of their ‘Theatre Local’

³² Field notes. The opinion was shared by many artists involved in temporary projects in the centre, such as Kay, conversation 15th February 2012, and Rebecca, conversation 11th November 2011.

³³ As for instance on the popular independent blog <http://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/art-and-regeneration> and the local SE1 Forum <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/3121> [accessed 15th April 2012].

³⁴ Royal Court Theatre website, <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/oxford-street-at-elephant-and-castle-shopping-centre> [accessed 13th June 2011].

³⁵ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

³⁶ St Modwen 2010: *Elephant breaks a leg! Retail and acting come together at iconic centre*, press release online, 12th March 2010 [accessed 11th October 2011].

programme, which aimed at “taking productions out of our Sloane Square home and placing them in alternative spaces at the heart of London life”.³⁷ The interest of the Royal Court Theatre in the Elephant and Castle area was therefore based on an active search for a ‘local community’ that, unsurprisingly, involved crossing the river to reach ‘alternative’ South London. After running another project in another vacant shop, in 2010, as will be recounted below, The Royal Court Theatre’s inroads in the ‘local communities’ brought them to another low-income area in Southwark, the ‘alternative space’ of Peckham.³⁸

According to the centre’s representative, the collaboration with the Royal Court Theatre “had the biggest impact, in terms of raising awareness and probably triggering people’s imagination” about reusing temporary shops, particularly through art and performance-based projects.³⁹ Between May and August 2009, moreover, unit 316 on the lower ground floor became the base for *The Elephant Rooms*, “a new roving art space in the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre”,⁴⁰ obtained rent-free and managed by Corsica Studios, an arts/music venue formerly situated in the Kings Cross area and since 2003 located in one of the railway arches behind the centre, on Elephant Road. The project hosted several workshops and group exhibitions, such as *Together, At the Junction*, (29th July - 2nd August 2009). Its press release reproduced several tropes of artistic pop-ups in vacant shops:

The failed relic of a once promising 1960’s architectural structure will be the stage for a series of performances, live sound pieces and art works, in both the exhibition space and in the communal foyer space within the centre. [...] South London has [...] produced a succession of noteworthy art collectives and artists who, in the best traditions of DIY, have taken their fate into their own hands and set about finding less styled spaces in which to exhibit their work. The Elephant Rooms will create a highly visible everyday context and provide the environment for these groups to converge and engage with new and different audiences.⁴¹

³⁷ Over six months the Royal Court presented a season of work in a vacant shopping unit at Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre: *Random*, *Disconnect*, *The Empire* and *Spur of the Moment*, the latter three being Jerwood Theatre Upstairs productions. <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/season/theatre-local> [accessed 13th June 2011].

³⁸ See press release <http://royalcourttheatre.com/season/theatre-local-peckham> [accessed 13th June 2011].

³⁹ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

⁴⁰ See Corsica Studios press releases 2009, www.corsicastudios.com [accessed 11th July 2011].

⁴¹ Ibid.

The description of the shopping centre as a stage, and the reference to the negative perceptions associated with the shopping centre, is here paired with a celebration of do-it-yourself ethos and the use of ‘less styled’ exhibition spaces that allegedly enable ‘new and different audiences’. In late 2009 unit 316, the same unit of *The Elephant Rooms*, was occupied by artists working on the Elephant Parade charity run, in favour of the Elephant Family fund raising to save Asian elephants from extinction, to the delight of the managers who stated that “shoppers have been curious to see the artists at work – they are a real talking point”.⁴²

In spring 2010, two years after their first production, the Royal Court Theatre returned to the shopping centre with a three-month programme of four plays – described as “a media success [that] made the BBC, made all the papers”⁴³ – in another vacant unit on the upper ground floor, unit 215-216.⁴⁴ According to the shopping centre’s official plans⁴⁵ and to local residents’ accounts, before becoming the site of Theatre Local the unit had been occupied since 2003 by the Sunrise Academy, a learning centre for government funded training courses such as basic literacy and computer skills.⁴⁶ The Theatre Local promotional leaflet [fig. 5.4] represented the shop unit in its precise location on the southern arm of the upper ground floor of the shopping centre, by the staircase. The selective angle of the image, however, individualises and de-contextualises the shop, leaving out the surrounding retailers and offices, making invisible what the centre’s managers called the ‘heart of the community of Elephant and Castle’.⁴⁷ The theatre goers queuing or waiting by the entrance of the shop, in the background, and the passers-by pointing at the shop in the foreground, are curiously depicted as blank silhouettes.

⁴² See ‘Colourful elephant parade comes to shopping centre’ press release of the Elephant Parade London 2010: <http://www.elephantparadelondon.org/index.html> [accessed 11th July 2011].

⁴³ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

⁴⁴ In order to secure the unit for six months (including rehearsal and production time between the shows), the Royal Court Theatre had to negotiate to pay full market rent for the shop, something that a small scale self-organised theatre production would have most probably been unable to afford.

⁴⁵ Green and Partners, floor plan dated 10th October 2011, courtesy of St Modwen.

⁴⁶ An Ofsted report mentions that reductions in government funding for learndirect, ESOL, and ICT had already had a negative impact on the communities who used the site regularly, and who could not afford the new rates. Ofsted 2007: *Report: the Sunrise Academy, Elephant and Castle*, <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report/provider/ELS/54928> [accessed 12th March 2011], p. 4.

⁴⁷ St Modwen, 2010: ‘Elephant breaks a leg! Retail and acting come together at iconic centre’, press release (online) 12th March 2010.

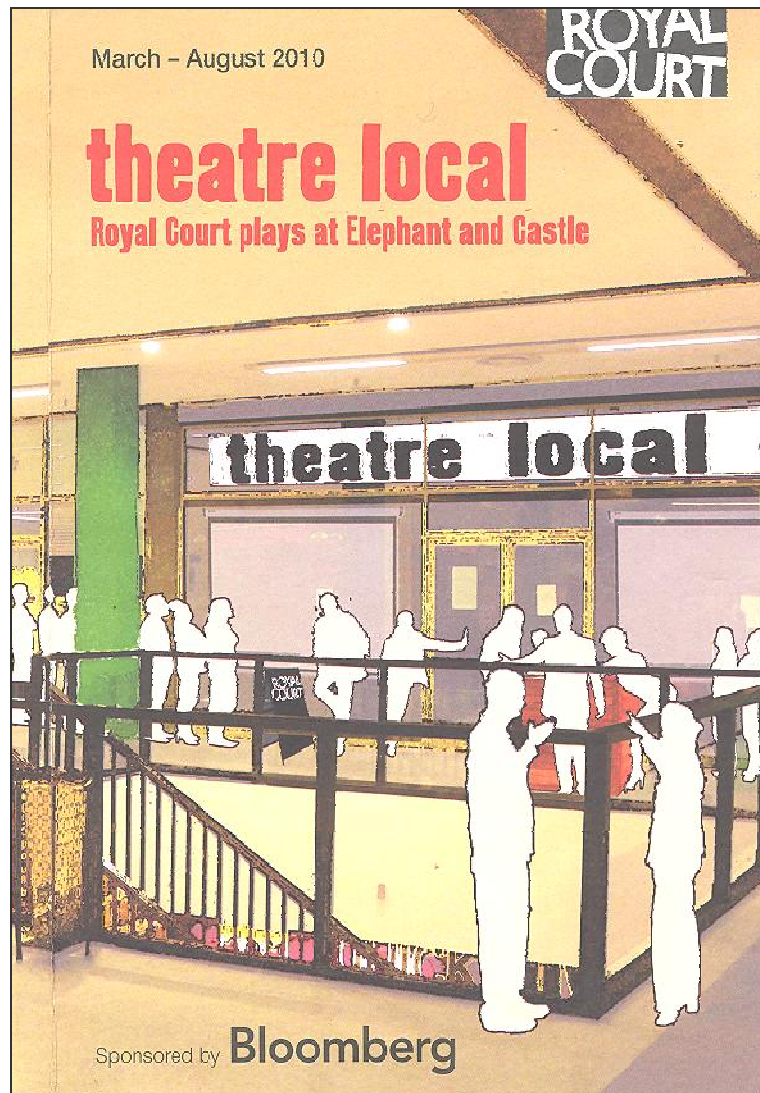


Figure 5.4 Theatre Local. Royal Court plays at Elephant and Castle, leaflet, March 2009. *Source:* personal archive.

While the image can be seen as non-prescriptive representation of the types of ‘new audiences’ created by the Theatre Local, it is also the representation of an unknown faceless crowd, giving a sense that the space would be otherwise empty. In reality, the corridor between the units at that end of the upper floor is very lively in day time, and is home to two busy cafés with tables and a sitting area, Café Nova and La Bodeguita Café, and a tailor/alterations kiosk. The kiosk lies less than a meter from the right railing of the staircase in the foreground, and only a carefully slanted bottom right angle of vision, presumably elaborated from a photo, could have hidden its permanent glass and metal structure.

Positive, positive, positive!

When asked why most projects seemed to be particularly referencing the Elephant as an audience, the centre's representative responded that: "people don't tend to want to come in here unless they have an interest in the Elephant! [laughter]"⁴⁸ implying that the shopping centre is not a popular destination beyond local traders and residents. The 'interest in the Elephant' of many projects relied on the assumption that residents and workers in the area constituted an 'alternative' audience. Projects such as Royal Court's *Theatre Local*, for instance, although sensitive to broadening audience participation, were interested in the 'local' as a local, not as *the* local of a specific neighbourhood.⁴⁹ The designation of 'the Elephant' as a site for 'community engagement' shaped the branding of the shopping centre, which between 2010 and 2011 was described in the centre's press releases as a 'true community hub' and 'a community venue as well as a place to shop'.⁵⁰ The shopping centre surveyor was quoted saying that by offering vacant spaces they were happy to "capitalise on [the] sense of community and interaction" since the main aim of temporary uses is to counter vacancy through an experience of activity: "[t]he last thing anyone wants is a barren unit. Posters are good, but what you really want is people milling around inside".⁵¹

The idea that visual and performing art uses are better 'fillers' to vacancy and the ghost of declining retailing than bi-dimensional posters, indicates a preference for embodied activity rather than a mere covering of the 'barren units'. The notion that creative practices will 'bring life' to the shopping centre can be seen to reproduce imaginaries of vibrancy and vitality associated with cultural practices in the context of culture-led regeneration discourses and creative cities policies. The comment 'posters are good, but what you really want is people milling around inside' quite literally articulates how this idea of vitality is embodied by the display

⁴⁸ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011. Regular bi-weekly site visits from summer 2009 to autumn 2011.

⁴⁹ Within their pop-up trans-local framework, there were projects, such as the production of *Elephant 21* at Theatre Local, which involved close collaborations with local residents and with artists, such as Studio at the Elephant's Eva Sajovic.

⁵⁰ St Modwen, 2010, *Elephant breaks a leg! Retail and acting come together at iconic centre*, press release (online) 12th March 2010. A similar argument was made by the centre's manager in relation to a Christmas 'tea dance', with free mince pies and a brass band concert during December 2011. He described the shopping centre as 'a great community venue as well as a place to shop' St Modwen, 2011: *Festive singing and dancing at the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre*, press release (online), 7th December 2011.

⁵¹ Ibid.

of practitioners and audiences physically occupying and carrying out activities inside the shop fronts in a simulation of retail activity. The rationale for rent-free 'creative' uses is therefore not simply a matter of creating bi-dimensional cosmetic window-dressing, but an experiential window-dressing where visitors and shoppers are encouraged to cross the shop window to enter a stage and 'mill around inside', giving a visual impression of vibrant activity even when technically no trading is taking place. The management's agenda for the 'milling around' of audiences was also visible in the choice of the types of contents allowed to occupy the centre temporarily.

As explained by the centre's representative, several considerations informed the decision to allow temporary activities in vacant units:

[W]e very rarely say no. Very, very rarely. We have to be careful on the religious side of stuff. We get people wanting to open up church shops and stuff, to which we say no. I made a blanket policy on religious stuff. [...] they can be the nicest people in the world, but unfortunately when religion comes into play, there's always someone that... isn't happy. So we just sort of say, blank no [...] other uses... normally when people contact me I have a long chat with them on the phone. [...] I just explain how it works. And then I ask them for a proposal, like a business plan, some sort of structure of how that's going to work, examples of the art, that sort of thing, you know. Art as you know is a very big word, and you have to make sure that the images they put up aren't, you know, anti-religion, or degrading to women, or of a sexual nature, or oppressive, you know, you have got to be very careful in terms of people walking by. Most people are fully aware, they are in a shopping centre, that their target audience is from zero to ninety-five and every race, every religion they can imagine. It's a very open canvass, and I think that's what makes it attractive.⁵²

The audience of the shopping centre is here represented as an open canvas and its variety is invoked to explain the degree of filtering out that precedes the moment of visibility of a shop in the centre. As admitted by the representative, 'art' can encompass a large variety of imagery and practices, and for this reason projects have to be screened beforehand in case they could be deemed 'offensive'. Beyond

⁵² Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

reasonable considerations of potentially racist, religiously offensive or sexist content, however, the central issue underlying the choice in practices and projects is their position within the existing narrative the Elephant and Castle regeneration:

The other thing, which is a big, big issue for us, is when people come in here, if they are doing projects on the Elephant, that [the project] is positive. It's very easy to be negative about the Elephant and Castle, both past and future, and what we say is, if you want to be here we want you to say positive things not negative things. You know. You get someone in there who's painting pictures of, you know, Elephant and Castle falling down, putting a big banner up with 'The End of the Elephant' and stuff like that, the tenants next door are like 'oh, hang on, this isn't bringing people in, this makes it look awful', and people who're buying here 'oh, I don't want to go to the Elephant and Castle' so, all the messages, I always say: positive, positive, positive!⁵³

In the same interview the centre's representative commented that "perception is a big big problem" and that the message has to be 'positive' "otherwise you'd be adding fuel to fire".⁵⁴ The combination between the simulation of trading, people 'milling around inside' vacant shops, and the 'positive, positive, positive' message to be expressed about the past and future of the Elephant, shows a clear example of the way in which the framing of temporary 'pop-up' projects tries to aid the positive imagery that developers, such as St Modwen, and the local Council were promoting in relation to the stalled regeneration scheme. St Modwen's symbolic capitalisation on Elephant and Castle as a cultural site for 'community' outreach, and its appearance of supporting local community businesses and residents, thus appears a careful short-term branding strategy within the long-term plan for the refurbishment of the shopping centre, which couldn't be further from this 'community' imaginary. As most traders within the shopping centre are on short-term leases, their displacement once the redevelopment plans will be approved will be easy and rapid. The indicative plans presented to the public in spring 2011 implied a total redevelopment of the site, with a luxury residential tower and larger (and more expensive) shop units.⁵⁵

⁵³ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ As reported on the local SE1 Forum <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/5297> [accessed 22nd June 2012]. In fact, in early July 2013 St Modwen announced its intention to sell the centre, as plans for redevelopment had failed to move forward, <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/6937>

As explained by the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre's representative, redevelopment had been on the horizon since the acquisition of the site in 2002. In the context of the regeneration scheme, St Modwen's interests in redeveloping the building were essentially aligned to those of the other real estate developers:

The fascinating thing about the Elephant and Castle is also that there are lots of people doing several different things, there's us, there's Lend Lease, there's Oakmayne doing development sites. We all want the same thing, we are not in competition. We all want redevelopment to work. Because if it doesn't work for one it's not going to work for all of us, so it's in our best interest... joined up thinking. [...] Tenants, they are all aware of the redevelopment. We have told them all the way through their leases, including the break clauses, and they've agreed to do the redevelopment. Not all of them, a couple are protected, you know, but... unfortunately as they say, you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. Unfortunately, you know, there is going to be some tenants who are very disappointed, unfortunately, and, to redevelop the centre we'll need to move them out.⁵⁶

As discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the Centre for Possible Studies, 'the Elephant' as a hotspot for art pop-ups is indicative of a redevelopment fault line in inner London and an emerging frontier of new-build gentrification. The representative's encouragement of artistic temporary uses can thus be seen as a micro-strategy that parallels the short term leases and break clauses of the other traders and tenants, whose presence in the centre is equally precarious and critically dependent upon the long-term plans for redevelopment and the displacement of the existing 'community' traders.

Studio at the Elephant: 'being representative of the centre'

The narrative produced by the shopping centre's management represents a top-down official version of the reasons for the proliferation of temporary art shops in the centre, which was, however, challenged by many practitioners who saw it as an instrumental *a posteriori* labelling of cultural practices and processes that were

[accessed 16th July 2013].

⁵⁶ Interview with a representative of the shopping centre, 10th October 2011.

already taking place within and around the site.⁵⁷ Yet it is interesting to note that the temporary projects taking place in the centre after 2008, often reproduced the discourse of ‘community’ of the official marketing, and used the centre's agendas to gain access to spaces. The official discourse is therefore an important element to consider for understanding the discursive and practical framing of Studio at the Elephant that, as explained by Rebecca, was able to negotiate a rent free unit because the managers “luckily saw it as a community project”.⁵⁸ While Studio at the Elephant practitioners joined other arts practitioners involved in temporary reuse in praising the shopping centre managers for what one called a “really forward-thinking attitude towards letting artists use empty spaces”⁵⁹, the official narrative presented so far informed the boundaries of the openness of the Studio to the ‘public’, both in terms of participation and in terms of the encounters with the audience.

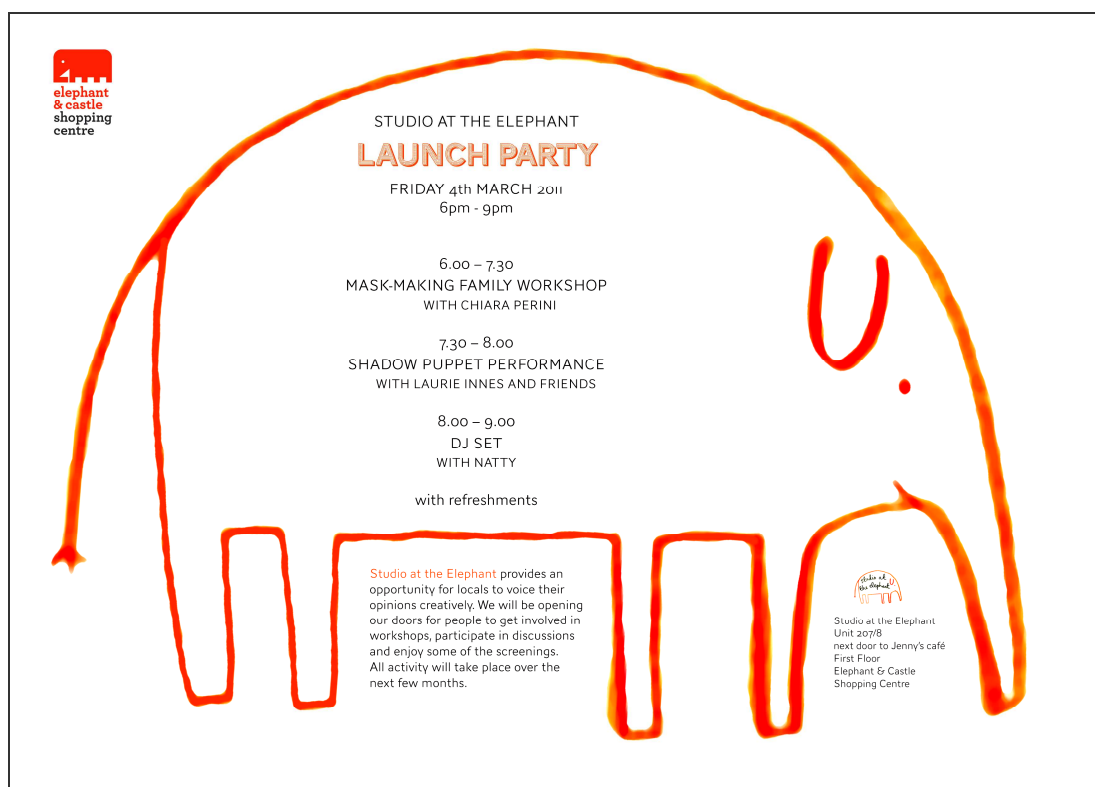


Figure 5.5 Studio at the Elephant *Launch Party* email invite, Friday 4th March 2011. *Source*: personal archive.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Studio claimed to run as an open platform through an ongoing programme of activities, some of which were initiated

⁵⁷ Conversation with Rebecca and Eva, 2nd August 2011.

⁵⁸ Conversation with Rebecca, 3rd December 2010.

⁵⁹ Conversation with Kay 15th February 2012.

by the coordinators, while others were proposed by visitors and practitioners. Their first public action in preparation for the launch of the second Studio at the Elephant unit, on the 4th March 2012, was to circulate an invite via email to local residents and to people who had been part of the first Studio at the Elephant's mailing list [fig. 5.5]. The text underneath the elephant read:

Studio at the Elephant *provides an opportunity for locals to voice their opinions creatively. We will be opening our doors for people to get involved in workshops, participate in discussions and enjoy some of the screenings* [emphasis added].⁶⁰

The invite performed several claims that positioned the space and the aims of the project as 'open': on one hand, it promised to offer 'locals' 'an opportunity to voice their opinions', and on the other to open its doors 'for people to get involved', as participant-audience, in a range of activities.⁶¹ In terms of proposing activities and projects, as explained by Eva, "the whole point of our space is that it's a platform for people to come and do and bring whomever they want, to pitch it the way they want. It's very, very free".⁶² The 'free' platform, however, was centrally coordinated by the two organisers, who none-the-less rejected the role of 'curators' or managers of the space, claiming that their project was 'unplanned', but at the same time retained full decision-making powers on the programme and on the types of content that they did not want to host. Both artists were very aware of the public function of their project and of the responsibility of being located inside a shopping centre, both in terms of their performance to the managers – "[we] have also got responsibility towards the people that are giving [us] the space" – and in terms of their presence 'being representative of the centre' as a whole.⁶³ Because of this, they professed an a-political stance throughout their residency and the expressed the desire for their project and their position within the space to be neutral:

⁶⁰ Studio at the Elephant *Launch Party* invite, Friday 4th March 2011. On the right hand side, the address of the unit is accompanied by the phrase 'next door to Jenny's Café', which pointed to a local landmark 1970s burger joint, in a textual nod to local residents and regular users of the shopping centre. The invite was also published on the Studio at the Elephant blog and the subsequent announcements on blogs, websites and printed press releases, see <http://studioattheelephant.blogspot.co.uk>, 2nd March 2011 [accessed 7th March 2011].

⁶¹ Of which the launch party offered a sample: a mask-making family workshop, a shadow puppet performance, and a dj-set with refreshments.

⁶² Eva, conversation 31st May 2011.

⁶³ Ibid.

Eva: Because we want to be neutral, we don't want to be political. There were some political projects that wanted to come in and we went 'no' because we don't want to be unnecessarily controversial [...] we are not really interested in saying, oh, they [the developers] are horrible, they are horrible, they are horrible, that's not our role.

Rebecca: no... and they've given us the space, so...⁶⁴

Acting as facilitators of the space, the artists found themselves in a mediating position, where they felt a responsibility both towards the public of the Elephant and towards the property managers that gave them the space rent-free. The decision not to host certain activities, however, was not frictionless:

R: [...] some people come in and go: I want to put up a show in here, and we say, this is not really an exhibition space, and then they say, but it's a community space, I am member of the community, so... you don't have the right to tell me 'no', I want to. So, this has put me in a pickle, hang on a second, how could... how do you exit it?⁶⁵

Reflecting back on all the projects that they accepted and on those that were refused, Rebecca commented that:

We had to tread softly while being quite stern [...] We had to be... you have to control it, but you also got to consider that there are so many different audiences and kind of organisations, you know, the council and...[...] it's been quite interesting that [in regards to] the space where we are in and the relationships that we formed, we've been... not clever, but because we have been so considerate now, we should be proud of ourselves that we managed to hold hands with St Modwen while holding hands with people that hate St Modwen. You know, and to kind of being in the middle of that, and be very aware of that... [...] We have got a responsibility to the community, to the people that came, to St Modwen, to ourselves, you know, to the artists, and because we are kind of curating it..

R: yeah...

E: you can't just leave it completely to whoever comes [otherwise] it's like Hyde Park Corner, isn't it?⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Conversation with Eva and Rebecca, 31st May 2011.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The reason for a degree of control on the programme is justified with the reference to a renowned place of public speech, Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, which is here taken as an example of indiscriminate public openness. The practitioners' awareness of the different audiences and organisations whose expectations and sensitivities had to be taken into account include the local council and the shopping centre's owners, 'the community', which indicates the local community of residents and traders, 'the people that came', visitors who may or may not have connections with the site, and finally to the artists, including themselves, whose work and reputation is linked to the framing of the programme and to the success of the project as a whole. The figurative expression of the artist as 'holding hands' with individuals and groups who would have otherwise been in strong antagonistic relationships, represents the position of symbolic and political intermediaries inhabited by the artists, and the awareness of their mode of approach, 'treading softly while being quite stern', towards the many different urban actors, participants and visitors involved in the space.

Despite the intention 'not to be political', however, the Studio offered a platform to a few projects whose politics were definitely outspoken, such as the three-week residency of LAWAS, the Latin American Workers Association.⁶⁷ The decision to host LAWAS had developed 'organically' through two different women artists, one of whom was Spanish-speaking, who had been part of the open programming⁶⁸ and chimed in with the practitioners' desire to outreach to the Latin American communities in the shopping centre, considered one of the cultural centres of the Latin American community in the UK.⁶⁹ Members of LAWAS were in residency at the Studio for three weeks from the 10th April 2011 until the 1st of May

⁶⁷ LAWAS is a labour rights voluntary organisation founded in 2002 with a focus on the rights of Spanish-speaking migrants from South and Central America living in the United Kingdom and affiliated with the international anarchist union IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). <http://www.lawas.org.uk/joo/> [accessed 22nd March 2012]. Their regular activities had consisted up to that date in campaigns around living wages and fair labour conditions, as well as regular free language swap (Spanish-English) classes hosted on the premises of the Southbank University, located at the north end of the Elephant and Castle roundabout.

⁶⁸ One of the artists had just moved to London from Spain and had come to see the space because of Eva's *Home from Home* book, and was keen on bringing in LAWAS and more broadly activities in Spanish to address the Latino community of the area. The other, a screen printer and friend of Rebecca from university, had run a banner-making workshop with LAWAS members only a few weeks before holding herself a workshop in the Studio.

⁶⁹ See the recent report: McIlwaine, C., Cock, J.C. and Linneker, B. 2011: *No Longer Invisible: The Latin American Community in London*. London: Trust for London.

to coincide with the march for Labour Day [see the leaflet in fig. 5.6]. The Studio was used as a workshop to make banners through painting technique of ‘batik’.⁷⁰



Figure 5.6 Screenshot of *LAWAS at the Elephant* leaflet, April 2011. Source: <http://www.lawas.org.uk/joo/> [accessed 22nd March 2012].

For Rebecca, the Studio was perfect for LAWAS’ organising strategy since it offered them visibility without a direct association with a specific Latin American business, which could have undermined their outreach to other traders: it was “a completely neutral turf for them to be on, and yet it [was] very central because it [was] right in the shopping centre”.⁷¹ The visibility and the richness of activities that LAWAS brought into the space initially made it difficult for Rebecca to step down as she felt ‘a bit protective with the space’, especially about the ways in which they visually and aurally occupied the space:

They hosted quite a busy week of events and workshops, including a protest sing-a-long, and they had a batik workshop so they made banners as part of their protest [...] there was lots of food and music [...] they kind of took over, and made it their own space. When they came in, there were banners everywhere, up in the window, and then they put stuff on the walls, and all outside, and [had] a big sound system.⁷²

⁷⁰ See: Art and activism unite at Elephant and Castle. In *The Prisma: the Multicultural Newspaper*. 15th May 2011, <http://www.theprisma.co.uk/2011/05/15/art-and-activism-unite-at-elephant-and-castle/> [accessed 22nd March 2012].

⁷¹ Conversation with Eva and Rebecca, 31st May 2011.

⁷² Ibid.

When asked whether LAWAS' residency in the space contradicted Rebecca and Eva's professed desire for their project to be a-political, the practitioners replied that it was "political for the community" while the projects that they had rejected were described as "random, nothing to do with the community, just kind of, this is an opportunity for me to show my very political, kind of quite horrible work [...] and I am going to give you a hard time if you don't give it to me".⁷³ This example shows an interesting distinction between different understandings of 'political projects'. The Studio's practitioners agreed to host a group that operated transversally to the cultural sector, since they felt that their political demands and aims revolved around migration issues that were close to the less visible communities in the area.⁷⁴ In this way, the Studio opened up the space to other kinds of activities and audiences and, by offering a resource, created direct solidarity with local struggles for visibility and recognition. While on the surface the performance of colourful occupation suited the discursive framing of 'community hub', the residency allowed for workers' rights meetings and for organising support for a labour march, activities that would have most probably not have been offered a space by the centre's representatives. By framing its activities as a cultural programme, the Studio acted as an intermediary and as a mediator, implicitly accommodating political organising activities (albeit in a foreign language) within an 'a-political' space.

Engendering publics

The LAWAS residency was celebrated by the local multicultural newspaper *The Prisma* in an article entitled 'Art and Activism Unite', which described the openness of the Studio to a public of "all ages and cultures [...] people from the African and English community"⁷⁵ beyond the Latin American own. According to LAWAS' coordinators, the residency was their first, successful experience of

⁷³ Eva, conversation 31st May 2011.

⁷⁴ The residency took place in the middle of a three-year campaign by several Latin American groups, headed by the Latin American Recognition Campaign (LARC) aimed at making Southwark Council recognise Latin American communities as an ethnic minority. The campaign was eventually successful when in May 2012 Southwark became the first London borough to officially include South American communities in the official borough's minorities. See Southwark Council 2012: 'Southwark becomes first council to officially recognise its Latin American community', http://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/article/953/southwark_becomes_first_council_to_officially_recognise_its_latin_american_community [accessed 10th September 2012].

⁷⁵ Art and activism unite at Elephant and Castle, *The Prisma*.

organising a cultural event beyond their labour rights work, and beyond marches and campaigns, and enabled them to reach out to new members of the Spanish speaking community.⁷⁶ Moreover, it made Latin American issues present within the space. After the residency took place, the Studio began publishing their press releases in Spanish and posting them on the door of the space among the posters for events and workshops, which up until then had been solely in English, as well as keeping LAWAS political leaflets on display inside the shop.⁷⁷ Both artists talked about the project as very successful in their desire to outreach because it drew in audiences from the Latin American communities that hadn't previously visited the space.

The question of the audiences of the Studio's activities weighed on the mind of the practitioners, who felt that attracting audiences was part of their role and their responsibility having obtained the space for free:

R: we are running the space, we are facilitating these artists, the artists do their own thing, their own workshop, but because we have set it up, of course they expect us to promote it and bring in the people [...] you have to nurture the workshops [...] I personally don't want to be having somebody in hosting workshops in our space where barely anyone turns up, I think it's in our interest to promote and do something about [it] if there's a bit of activity, of course you want to promote that. And yet, it's tiring, and it's something that is distracting and takes up a lot of our time, but... that's what our role has become. That's what our role is.⁷⁸

In Rebecca's words: "I not only felt obliged, I felt like I had to look after [the artists] and promote their workshops, because then that helps us [too] [...] they've come in and they've done a workshop for free, for our benefit as well, not just for their own".⁷⁹ By contrast, Eva felt that while inviting people to attend the event was part of the agenda of the space – "we invite people because they are open events" – she felt strongly that they should not feel obliged to be responsible for it.⁸⁰ This disagreement about the unspoken expectation that they were responsible for

⁷⁶ Personal conversations with a member of LAWAS, 11th June 2011. A similar account was voiced also during LAWAS' public presentation at *Who are the Migrant Workers Today?*, INIVA (Institute of International Visual Arts), London, on 14th September 2011.

⁷⁷ Diary entry, 5th May 2011.

⁷⁸ Conversation with Eva and Rebecca, 31st May 2011

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

engendering publics offered important insights into implicit demands made on the practitioners by themselves, by the artists that they hosted, and by the management:

R: I am just saying that I don't think that it works like that. I think that we have to, we've had to, that's why we are tired now, we've had to work hard for it, making lots of people come to workshops, events and screenings.[...]

E: I don't think the pressure comes from events and people. It's more us feeling that we need to give something back to St Modwen.⁸¹

The pressure to actively engender audiences and experiences of buzzing activity in and around the space is also discussed as being the result of another type of non-monetary exchange: the promise made to St Modwen when they signed the lease for the shop. In the disagreement between the two coordinators are visible the tensions and complex expectations produced by the implicit demand for symbolic and experiential exchanges that underlies the offer of a rent-free space.

Moreover, since the Studio was presented as a 'community project', this implicit expectation also manifested itself in the outreach to the wider public, as both coordinators felt the need to mediate and promote their programme to broader audiences than those invited by the artists:

R: if we just [...] left [the artists] to it, and let them find their own way and invite whomever they want [...] we would be one of those spaces that advertise it only to their own kind, we'd only have people like us there, but it's important that, the kind of outreach is really important to what we are doing. It's... so important, and otherwise we would be just another one of those bloody spaces, like in Peckham, where they just advertise it on Facebook, and where just their family and friends come, you know."⁸²

The openness of the projects to facilitate encounters beyond 'people like us' was crucial to distinguishing the project from careerist art 'pop-ups', here summoned through references to the Peckham art gallery scene, and as discussed in Chapter 3. Besides direct invitations, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the Studio ran an open door policy two days a week, on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

⁸¹ Conversation with Eva and Rebecca, 31st May 2011.

⁸² Ibid. The reference to Peckham, a nearby area in Southwark, hints at the recent proliferation of a series of temporary spaces and commercial art galleries in a neighbourhood up until then renowned for its Caribbean and East and West African migrant communities. An example of the international reach of the pop-up art projects in that area is the Peckham Pavilion, a regular summer pop-up venue on the roof of a vacant car park, which was one of the Unofficial Pavilions of the 2009 Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art, Venice, Italy.

The front shop window was adorned with colourful bunting, following the recognisable pop-up aesthetic discussed in Chapter 3; the doors of the shop were open, there was a low table, a sofa and chairs in the shop window on the left hand side of the shop; tea and biscuits for passersby and visitors, and a board with the writing ‘open drop in’ [fig. 5.7]. On ‘open door’ afternoons either or both practitioners were available to talk and explain their project to whomever crossed the threshold, and sometimes they would sound record the conversations for their archive of oral histories of the area.⁸³



Figure 5.7 Screenshot of photos of the second unit of Studio at the Elephant (left) and detail (right).
 Source: <http://studio.homefromhome-online.com/> [accessed 3rd April 2011].

The openness of the shop to uninvited visitors and participants beyond ‘people like us’ raised more questions than answers, as Rebecca admitted: “who are the people that come to events that are not mobilised by the artists? How much are [other people] responsive? When it happens it’s great and it’s very, very good, but ...on the whole? I don’t know”.⁸⁴ The difficulties of engaging with passers-by and shoppers despite the physical openness of the space and the strategies to make it welcome was an item of reflection among many of the practitioners who used vacant units in the centre, who tended to agree that openness to the broader public had to be actively staged, encouraged and managed across the invisible barriers. An important question to be asked is, therefore, what kind of normative processes of public emergence are engendered through forms of public address.⁸⁵ Kay, a visual artist

⁸³ Conversation with Eva and Rebecca, 31st May 2011.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Mahony, Newman, and Barnett, *Rethinking the public*.

who ran a short-term art project in one of the empty units in the centre in the summer of 2011, reflected on the two weeks spent installing and invigilating her exhibition:

Lots and lots and lots of people would stand outside the windows and look in. And I had two [film] projections going [...] and they would stand there for ages and ages [...] I opened up the big doors, and I opened all the doors so that it was, literally, people could just walk in. But what was really interesting was that people were then standing on the thresholds but they wouldn't... they wouldn't cross that. If I left them alone, they might, they might just cross over, and if I went talking to them they would just go away. [...] The people who stand on the threshold, it's difficult to know how to get, how to get them to cross over, and also if they need to cross over, you know. Maybe that's fine, they're engaging with it in their own way, they are doing their window-shopping...⁸⁶

The gesture of opening all the doors and the active attempts to engage with 'the people who stand on the threshold' did not translate into people crossing the invisible boundary of the space and becoming the kind of art audience that she expected. Commenting on her experience, she divided her public into two kinds, and speculated on the reasons for their behaviours:

There's [sic] some people who walk in because they are curious, there's some people who go 'oh, it's an art show in a pop-up shop' and come in and have a look, and know what they are doing, know what to expect, that's fine. And then there're other people who just...don't know what to make of that at all, and so won't come in.⁸⁷

In her account, the likelihood of people crossing the threshold is based on different degrees of familiarity with the format of an art exhibition in a pop-up shop, which implies a certain familiarity with the discourses of temporary reuse discussed in

⁸⁶ Conversation with Kay, 15th February 2012. Kay is a visual and performance artist ran a participatory project that involved collecting local people's oral stories about their favourite views of the area, and their opinions about the way it was changing. After launching her project at Studio at the Elephant in May 2011, she decided to hold a one-week exhibition in one of the vacant units at the end of her project. Since the project "was about transition and change and [about] looking again at familiar places, the shopping centre felt like a really good place to have an exhibition because it's undergoing change itself", conversation, 15th February 2012. Her show took place in the unit 237-238 that had been previously occupied by the Royal Court Theatre, by Reuben Powell's *Hotel Elephant*, subsequently by *Janet and Jon Mosaics*, and successively by Nomad's pop-up cinema to screen Marcus Coates' shamanistic film about the Heygate Estate titled *Vision Quest: a ritual for Elephant & Castle* (2012).

⁸⁷ Conversation with Kay, 15th February 2012.

Chapter 3. The people who ‘know what they are doing’ and who ‘know what to expect’ and engage with the space without any need for an explanation are those who possess the cultural capital to relate with the space, as I was able to observe during open door days. Among unannounced visitors on a Tuesday afternoon, for instance, there were two art students from the local London College of Communication, a local musician, who had been involved with Reuben Powell’s temporary art and music venue the Elephant Hotel, and a PR professional who a few months later would become involved in a temporary gardening project at the Heygate Estate called ‘The Elephant and Castle Urban Forest’ during summer 2011.⁸⁸ While all these visitors were local residents, they also all represented a particularly art-educated sector of the local community, and one that might actually benefit, economically or in terms of status, from the transformations of the area into a ‘central London’ neighbourhood as promised by the regeneration plans.

The second kind of public identified by Kay – those who ‘just don’t know what to make of a pop-up shop’ – was allegedly a silent observer of the spectacle of reuse, to be watched at a distance. In her experience, this public’s reluctance to enter made her wonder whether “having these spaces, these pop-ups... means anything to [local people]”⁸⁹:

you never really know because the only people you find out from are the people who do engage in conversation, and who would tell you if they liked it or if they didn’t like it [...] and they tend to fall into two camps: very positive or very negative. You don’t get the kind of opinion in the middle.⁹⁰

A similar reflection was expressed during one of our conversations in the space, when Rebecca had commented how sometimes being in the space felt like being a zoo, with people watching you from the outside without interacting.⁹¹ In my frequent visits to the site I similarly experienced the sensation of being on display inside a glass cage. In the last week of March 2011, for instance, I took part in two sets of staged conversations, one in the second Studio proper, the other in the larger unit (308) where the first Studio project had taken place the previous November. Both

⁸⁸ As was visible on the Elephant & Castle Urban Forest blog, <http://elephantandcastleurbanforest.com/> [accessed 15th February 2012, now unavailable]. The same person successfully bid for temporary mobile gardens on the demolished phase 1 of the estate, see the website of the Mobile Gardeners <http://www.mobilegardeners.org/> [accessed 12th March 2013].

⁸⁹ Conversation with Kay, 15th February 2012.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

events took place in the evening and the upper ground floor was relatively quiet, although all the restaurants are open, and La Bodeguita restaurant was lively with Colombian live music. In both cases, the activities inside were perfectly visible through the shop windows, and in the second event the place was set up elegantly: the large unit was lit only by fairy lights, and participants sat along a long table placed across the space. The two artists served us food and water, and a small overhead projector in one corner was projecting a colour slide of the shopping centre in the 1960s [see fig. 5.8]. Towards the end of the dinner/conversation, the bingo hall closed and a crowd of people walked along the corridor, where the unit was, to leave the building from the southern exit. Most of them were elderly women and men, wearing everyday clothes, carrying shopping bags, staring at us tired and perplexed, and walking on. I noted it my diary “it feels like a jarring spectacle of comfort and luxury inside a much more ordinary set”.⁹²



Figure 5.8 Screenshot of photo documenting the Art of Conversation over Goulash, 25th March 2011.
Source: <http://studio.homefromhome-online.com/> [accessed 13th February 2012].

A charged presence

One of the emotions associated by practitioners with their presence in the Shopping Centre was a sense of frustration at not being able to explain their project to visitors and friends who questioned them on its ‘final outcome’. Rebecca recounted, for instance, how a close friend had challenged her to explain the ‘product’ of the project, to which she replied there was “no final product, it’s about

⁹² Diary entry, 25th March 2011.

experience and it's about what we are doing whilst here, and all of these events, and the people we are drawing in".⁹³ Reflecting on the frustration of explaining it to outsiders, both practitioners agreed that the only way to understand the project and its value was through a personal experience of the encounters happening in the space: "you have to come in, you have to experience it and see it, I... can't put it into words."⁹⁴ In these reflections it is clear that the experiential dimension was not only a key element of the project, but also that the process of using the space and drawing participants in was reclaimed by practitioners as an end in itself.

The experiential encounters in the space, however, were not always positive, and the practitioners recounted being aware from the beginning of their project that running a temporary shop in Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre was going to attract criticism and antagonism. On several occasions, both artists described the area as 'gutsy' and explained that any artist truly trying to engage with the people of the Elephant and producing work about it would "need to stand their ground" because "people are cocky and speak their mind".⁹⁵ Rebecca for instance recalled how people would sometime murmur passing her by while she was making drawings in the corridors of the shopping centre in the early period of her project, and Eva reflected that often "people here think, oh, it's two artists having a studio, taking the piss, in one of the units of the Elephant".⁹⁶ To illustrate her point, Rebecca described a particularly confrontational encounter:

[...] a couple of people came in and they looked weary of the project... and I understand that. I think that a lot of people can be quite... territorial, in a way. And when you are doing art in the community, or community art, or certainly art in a public space, like this, and you have got an open door policy, people are quite opinionated and they feel like they have the right to come in and go 'this is crap' or whatever. And because of the way that I am, the negative comments probably stick out from all of the positive comments... [...] there were a couple of incidents where a couple of people came by and maybe they thought that I was just another artist that was just popping in and sodding off

⁹³ Conversation with Eva and Rebecca, 31st May 2011.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Eva, conversation 31st May 2011.

again, excuse my language but that's how they'd put it, you know. I think that some people do think that.⁹⁷

In Rebecca's reaction and reflection arises the question of territoriality for members of a public who perceive practitioners involved in temporary art projects as opportunists, 'popping up and sodding off again', who leave no legacy and who have no connection to the area and its issues. In the Elephant and Castle Shopping centre, this was even more so, and she felt strongly that "you can't really do [a pop-up] in a place like this, that is so politically heavy, and people are so attached to it"⁹⁸ which made it "inevitable that occasionally discussions in this space become quite political".⁹⁹

For practitioners involved in temporary projects in the centre, the political 'heaviness' of the site of the projects is linked, in practitioners' mind, to the sense of attachment to the shopping centre in the confused context of a potential demolition and redevelopment that was threatening to displace many traders and activities. Moreover, some local residents and shoppers were suspicious that all temporary uses in the shopping centre received funding from Southwark Council and were thus linked to the regeneration plans, something that in their eyes undermined the position of the artists and their ability to offer a truly open space for the community.¹⁰⁰ As commented by Kay:

Often there's no forum for people to talk about [urban change] and engage with it. So it often happens that if you are in a pop-up shop people assume that you are a) part of the Council, that's very odd really! And b) that you know [more about the plans].... When I was doing [the exhibition], there [was] this guy who came in, and he would not believe that I didn't have the plans for the Heygate [Estate] redevelopment. He wouldn't really... and I was saying 'no, I am not part of the Council, you know, and this isn't the consultation xyz, this is an art project'. I was a bit hurt that he couldn't tell! [laugh] but you find out a lot... because people are looking for a forum to voice their opinions [...] all the time they want to know what's happening with the redevelopment of the shopping centre.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Conversation with Rebecca, 3rd December 2010.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Diary entry, 10th December 2010.

¹⁰¹ Conversation with Kay, 15th February 2012.

In her account, she felt the need to explain the rationale of her project, her position as an artist, and to disassociate herself from the local council's temporary uses of the corridors as exhibition space for public consultation. This incident presents evidence of the ambiguous position of pop-up practices within a highly contested site. Contrary to Kay's account, the 'misunderstanding' of her project could be interpreted as, rather than a lack of understanding, an indication of local communities' ability to read through the agendas of the shopping centre's management and their instrumentalisation of cultural projects. Kay's quick judgement of local communities echoes Mariana's experience of local participation in her temporary projects in Somers Town, and her division between the 'people who could jump on board' with the project, and those who couldn't, as discussed in Chapter 4. Both approaches to participation curiously do not accept the refusal to participate as a legitimate and informed response.¹⁰²

Rather than a frictionless openness, the 'positive, positive, positive' open door policy therefore created a terrain for potentially quite intense and emotional encounters. Rebecca and Eva once described their everyday presence in the space as 'an intense kind of being'.¹⁰³ The implicit expectations and confrontations that play out in the moment of unexpected face-to-face encounters often engendered polarised emotional landscapes, as the practitioners would need to be welcoming, smiling and available for any sort of encounter. The open door drop-in was often described as the exciting element of the project, which in Rebecca's words made constant presence desirable: "I needed to be there everyday, there was no doubt...well, I wanted to be there everyday, it was so exciting for me".¹⁰⁴ The hesitation between 'needing' to be there everyday and 'wanting' to be there everyday revealed the expectation but also the affective pull of interactions with the public. But public presence was also a source of negative intensity, as public and semi-public events were described as a combination of "very exciting moments with very depressing moments":

¹⁰² An important reflection on the relationship between participation and power is offered by the 1969 seminal text by Sherry R. Arnstein 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', published in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, pp. 216-224. More recently, for a critical discussion of participation in development studies, see also Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. 2001: *Participation: the New Tyranny?*. London: Zed Books.

¹⁰³ Eva, conversation 15th March 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Conversation with Rebecca, 3rd December 2010.

R: it could be the smallest thing that can make both of us feel really bloody happy and really excited, but then it's also other things, that are kind of, quite draining...

E: very heavy, actually...

R: it's quite full on being in here, isn't it?

E: it is, yeah... It really is. [...] It's important to have a presence but at the same time it's a very ... charged presence.¹⁰⁵

The language used to describe their 'charged presence' in the space reflects the performance of openness and community engagement expected of them, and the need to personally mediate, justify their apolitical stance and to 'hold hands' with very different individuals and groups. The positive and negative emotions evoked echoed my own experience of their bodily forms of welcoming, mediating and negotiating which seemed to oscillate between a performance of enthusiastic excitement and constant positive availability, and rarer but still visible moments of tiredness and closure. In our conversations, the expectations of constant availability and approachability to the 'public' was identified by practitioners as an emotionally tiring part of their work in the space, and pointed to the important mobilisation of emotions in the performance of opening up the shop unit.¹⁰⁶

The 'draining' of energy was particularly evident towards the middle and the end of their project, when the practitioners realised the extent to which their presence in the space had to be mediated through listening and talking to people.¹⁰⁷ The intention of the practitioners to run an 'a-political' space jarred with the 'political heaviness' of a shopping centre where the management was actively encouraging 'positive' temporary reuse to convey the imaginary of a community that their own plans for redevelopment were set to displace. While it would be an exaggeration to interpret these reflections as an indication that practitioners' emotions were directly 'engineered' by the shopping centre's management, the two artists were nonetheless acutely aware of the politics framing their neighbourhood-scale performances and adjusted their behaviours accordingly. Their desire to not be 'unnecessarily

¹⁰⁵ Conversation with Eva and Rebecca, 15th March 2011.

¹⁰⁶ The mobilisation of emotional labour has been analysed by work such as Hochschild, A. R. 2003. *The managed heart: commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press. The relationship between immaterial and 'creative' labour has been discussed by Gill, R. and Pratt, A. 2008: In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work. *Theory Culture Society* 25, pp. 1-30.

¹⁰⁷ Conversation with Eva and Rebecca, 31st May 2011.

controversial' could be read as a coping strategy of self-censorship and personal negotiation within a complex affective geography.¹⁰⁸ In face-to-face encounters, the implicit demand for a constant positive presence, and the excitement and happiness that accompanied it, was paired by the negative affects of exhaustion and depression, as these expectations and conflicts were interiorised by practitioners. The encounters engendered by the 'open door' strategy of temporary shops are therefore to be examined as an important embodied component of temporary uses. Their critical analysis can reveal the dynamic and at times conflicted boundaries of practitioners' performance of openness, as well as the subjective ways in which they experience and make sense of their own role within and in relation to wider power relations.

Positioning a squatted shop

As I have examined so far in this chapter, the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre presented a particularly complex example of the conflicting expectations of practitioners, users, audiences and of the management, whose agenda for supporting community temporary projects constituted an important performative framing for experiencing temporary shops. The practitioners' experiences in the space analysed in the previous section revealed how this framing intersected with the intricate politics of an uncertain regeneration scheme to produce complex affective and emotional landscapes, which became particularly visible by paying attention to moments of intense public encounters. To what extent are frictions and misunderstandings the result of the compromises made by practitioners to gain access to a space within a 'community' branding exercise in a highly contested regeneration scheme? Would a more autonomous form of temporary occupation, such as discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the OffMarket, produce less conflictive and more open forms of public encounters? If the public dimension of temporary reuse can be seen as an on-going processual negotiation of practitioners' intentions and claims against the expectations of users and visitors, would the autonomous framing of a squatted shop front be necessarily more open?

¹⁰⁸ McLean, H. E. 2010: The politics of creative performance in public space. Towards a critical geography of Toronto case studies. In Edensor, T., Leslie, D., Millington, S. and Rantisi, N. (eds) *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy*, London: Routledge, pp. 200-213.

As explained in Chapter 3, the experience of the OffMarket can be positioned along with Non Commercial House and Well Furnished, as a community-oriented occupied shop front experimenting with forms of self-representation and an 'approachable' visual aesthetic. This section will explore how the spatial layout, the visual and textual props and the activities of volunteers and members of the collective contributed to the 'staging' of a space of public use and its unintended reception by users beyond the squatters' scene. Drawing on my own extended participant observation as a visitor, user and volunteer in the space, I will critically analyse the performative and emotional encounters that took place across the shop front, and discuss how they embodied unspoken issues with the political claims of the space.

In January 2011, the OffMarket produced a leaflet that was circulated in the local area and displayed at the entrance of the first occupied shop on Lower Clapton Road [fig. 5.9].

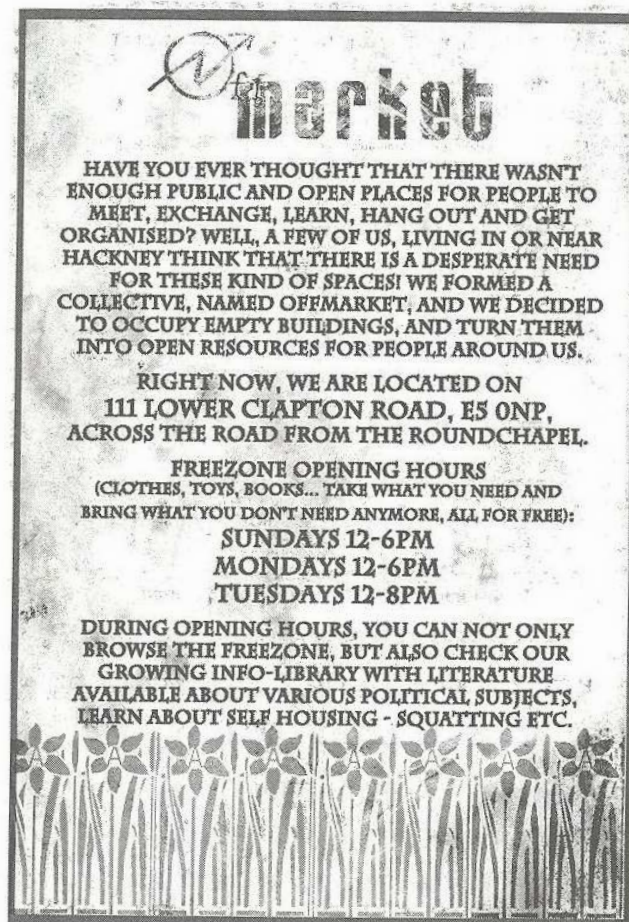


Figure 5.9 OffMarket leaflet, January 2011, front page. *Source:* personal archive.

The text on the leaflet begins with a question that explicitly addresses the reader, pointing to the lack of public and open spaces, and positioning the collective and their motives. The text contains three important public statements: it directly connects the project's rationale with the lack of 'public and open places' for meeting, spending time and organising in the area; it positions the activists as people who 'live in or near Hackney'; and it explains that the space has been occupied and turned into an 'open resource' for 'people around us'. The leaflet performs a similar function to the Studio at the Elephant launch invite discussed in the previous section by addressing those who are not 'in the know' in an attempt to advertise, to paraphrase Rebecca, beyond people of its own kind, which in this case meant beyond the squatting and activist scene. The back of the leaflet, which lists a calendar of regular activities, states that 'all activities are free and everyone's welcome', and even provides an email and a contact mobile number for 'comments, feedback and complaints'.

It is important to note that the contact information on the leaflet opened important channels of communication, as practitioners recalled several positive emails as well as one very angry phone call from a self-identified long-term resident, who stated that the activists were just outsiders who had no connection to the place, knew nothing about the real problems of the neighbourhood, and had no right to claim they were opening a space for the community.¹⁰⁹ The very fact that someone rang the number to make this critique was seen by the collective as a proof that their strategy of open communication was reaching beyond their own scene, although the polarisation of opinions, from very positive to extremely negative, may indicate parallels with Kay's reflection that practitioners in temporary shops rarely hear from the 'people in the middle'.

The strategy of outreaching and opening up the space to passers-by and local residents was also, importantly, embodied in the 'choreography' of openness of both OffMarket spaces, which involved keeping the doors open, distributing seating on the pavement and running regular open door drop in sessions four days a week, in the afternoon. Both occupied vacant shops were on Lower Clapton Road [see also

¹⁰⁹ Although several members of the collective would not disagree with the caller's critique, there was a general consensus that the relative lack of familiarity with the history and issues of the area was not a good enough reason not to continue running the shop as an open social space and resource centre for many local and non-local visitors and users. Conversation with a former member of the OffMarket collective, 14th April 2012.

figure 4.6], the main road connecting Hackney Central to Clapton and Stamford Hill that at the time was characterised by independent shops, charity shops, local cafés and take-aways. Recalling my first encounter with the first OffMarket, I was surprised to notice that the shop opened onto the street and visually harmonised with surrounding shops, a popular barbershop and a Caribbean take-away café. At the entrance I noticed a board that stated ‘we are open, COME IN!’¹¹⁰ My first impression of the ‘mimetic’ visual appearance of the occupied shop was shared by other practitioners living and working in Hackney, such as Hikaru, from the performance art collective *Artevict* discussed in Chapter 3, who recalled how on her first visit she had missed the place because she confused it with one of the many charity shops on the road.¹¹¹ Similarly, Alberto, one of the artists of The £100 Shop, also a local resident, told me that on one occasion he had passed by the shop with his six-year-old daughter and decided to walk in, something that he wouldn’t have done had it been a ‘usual squat’.¹¹²

As visible in figure 5.10, the front window was occupied by a mannequin and by thin wires hanging from the ceiling and holding transparent Perspex containers, similar to those visible in real estate agencies’ shop fronts. On a closer look, they held leaflets with information about upcoming local organising meetings related to issues such as the housing crisis and the cuts to local services. Looking in, one could see a sofa and a low table, and at the back of the space an area designated as ‘Free Zone’ with clothes racks, objects, and drawers over spilling with scarves, cuts of fabric and other trinkets.¹¹³ During my first and subsequent visits to the space in the ‘open door’ afternoons I observed that visitors were regularly invited to sit down, have some water or tea, and were encouraged to browse around the shop and ask questions of the volunteers.¹¹⁴ After the first OffMarket was evicted in late January 2011, another shop was reclaimed and quickly rearranged with a similar visual appearance. The intended openness of the site created an incident of intense antagonism when, a few hours after the vacant space had been occupied, the owner of the property entered the shop unannounced and verbally abused the activists,

¹¹⁰ Diary entry, 31st January 2011.

¹¹¹ Conversation with Hikaru, 14th February 2011.

¹¹² Informal conversation with Alberto Duman, 15th March 2011.

¹¹³ Diary entry, 31st January 2011.

¹¹⁴ Diary entry, 8th February and 14th February 2011. During subsequent visits to the shop in following weeks I observed how the writing on several a-boards and on the walls functioned as textual props to address a public unfamiliar with anarchist politics and counter-cultural spaces.

calling them ‘scum’ and telling them ‘people like you should be gassed to death’. The aggressive reaction was particularly angering to activists as this last remark was made to a softly spoken young female activist who had welcomed the owner and tried to explain to him what the collective was trying to do in the space.¹¹⁵



Figure 5.10 Front-shop of the first OffMarket, screenshot from the OffMarket page on *Indymedia London* [accessed 12th May 2012].

The new space was situated a few meters away between a vacant shop, a hardware shop, a charity shop and a launderette, and nearby a large 24/7 Off-licence and grocery shop, by a busy bus stop and overlooking a zebra crossing. The interior of the front space was organised around a sitting area to the left, with a sofa, two armchairs, two coffee tables and a small fridge, with milk, a kettle, a tray with cups and spoons and tea bags. Behind this, there was a long table covered by stacks of leaflets and flyers advertising ‘benefit gigs’, rallies and political meetings about

¹¹⁵ The story was well known among volunteers, and was also reported on an *Indymedia* article about the eviction, see <http://london.indymedia.org/articles/9544> [accessed 11th June 2011].

various issues ranging from the liberation of Palestine to the organised resistance to the closure of Hackney's libraries because of the cuts [fig. 5.11]. On the left wall there was a plain words definition of anarchism as non-hierarchical self-organisation, while on another a large white sheet of paper with the question 'What would you like to see/do in this space?' followed by a list of suggestions and proposals, with the email addresses of interested people.¹¹⁶

Despite the informal, colourful and 'messy' visual experience, the use of the space was subjected to a series of strict rules, some of which were written in large letters on the walls, such as 'no cameras please' and 'no smoking', while others were included under a 'safer spaces policy' displayed on one of the walls, which had been devised by the core collective before opening the space, and which was grounded on the principle of 'making sure everyone felt welcomed in the space'.¹¹⁷ As discussed in the previous chapter, the density of written text relied on the implicit assumptions of a high level of literacy among the regular users of the space, which on some occasions proved incorrect; in practice, volunteers and core members of the collective were expected to intervene in case of behaviours that breached agreed rules.



Figure 5.11 Interior of the second OffMarket, OffMarket page on *Indymedia London* [accessed 12th May 2012]. The photo was taken at the end of April 2011 after the police raid, as visible from the buckets of broken glass in the foreground.

¹¹⁶ Diary entry, 14th February 2011.

¹¹⁷ *A little guide to OffMarket*, pamphlet, spring 2011.

Some of the rules were particularly counter-intuitive to regular users of squatted social centres, as besides being smoke-free the shop was also alcohol-free and pets were not allowed, except assistance animals.¹¹⁸ On several occasions these rules were publicly challenged and discussed both by visitors and by other activists. At a political meeting run by a collective external to the space, for instance, I witnessed a moment of tension when an activist started to question why smoking was not allowed in the space and challenged the core collective to justify how such a rule was not simply reproducing the oppressive smoke-free policies of the government.¹¹⁹ In response, a member of the collective asserted the right of the core members to make decisions on matters that directly concerned their living and working space, an important tenet of self-organisation.

The rule about pets was directly motivated by the popularity of the space among parents of small children, who would often play in the space. Another rule decided for the second OffMarket stated that children could only stay in the space if accompanied by a guardian or an adult, as there had been incidents in the previous shop of parents leaving children while doing their grocery shopping in the area, which could have potentially put crew members and volunteers in a difficult position, both legally and in terms of the safety of the children in case of unexpected violence from the owners or a raid by the police.¹²⁰

‘Where’s the trick?’ Staging freeconomy and spatial re-appropriation

The OffMarket freeshop was located on the right hand side of the second space, but during open days it would expand until taking over most of the space inside and outside the shop. Above the railings on the right wall there were two signs which acted as textual framing to the display of objects: ‘this space has been empty for three years. We squatted it to bring it back to use’ and ‘this is a free shop. Take what you need and bring what you don't need any more!’ The objects on display included baby clothes, books, CDs, knick-knacks, beddings, curtains and fabric cuttings, old shoes, and leaning against the window a sign that explained that the

¹¹⁸ As explained in the web post 'OffMarket Opens New Space: Access & Info', 3rd February 2011, *Indymedia London*, <http://london.indymedia.org/articles/7211> [accessed 12th May 2012].

¹¹⁹ Diary entry, 8th January 2011.

¹²⁰ See for instance the raid that happened on the 26th April 2011, as reported on *Indymedia London* <http://london.indymedia.org/articles/8851> [accessed 12th May 2012].

space was squatted and that openly challenged negative media representations of squatters.¹²¹ There was a clothes rack in the middle, with women tops and accessories, and another for menswear. Children clothes were also hung on another railing that on open door days would usually be displayed on the pavement in front of the shop, which enabled people to access them without the need to enter the shop, together with a bench, and a supermarket trolley containing second-hand VHS cassettes.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the freeshop was seen by practitioners as an effective strategy to engage with the local communities and to offer a direct experience of mutual economies. While most political meetings, events and activities were organised and run by individuals external to the core collective but who already belonged to activist groups and networks, during the open door afternoons the freeshop constituted the real point of open encounter of the project, where activists would come into contact with, and had to negotiate their position in relation to, the 'community'. As explained by a member of the collective, having a free shop in a social centre is "an easy solution" to the question of how to engage with a wider public "because anybody can do with free stuff".¹²² Once explained to users and visitors, the logic of gift economy and of non-monetary exchange of the freeshop was a very direct way of generating complicity and solidarity, as I witnessed during several of my visits:

Today a teenager came briefly into the shop. He said hi and showed proudly to volunteers and visitors that he was wearing a t-shirt and a jersey taken the day before from the freeshop. He cat-walked around with a giant grin on his face and then left. A little later an elderly man, who spoke with a heavy foreign accent, entered the shop carrying two large bags and asked me: 'Who is in charge here?' I wasn't sure what to say, so I turned to the volunteers in the space, who replied gaily 'Nobody!' The man laughed aloud, left a bag full of men's clothes and porcelain knick-knacks and thanked all of us before leaving.¹²³

The response offered by the volunteers was an important self-identifying utterance on behalf of a self-organised non-hierarchical space, pointing at the prefigurative

¹²¹ This is the text "This is a squat and you are very welcome!" discussed towards the end of Chapter 3. Diary entry, 30th May 2011.

¹²² Conversation with a former member of the OffMarket collective, 14th April 2012.

¹²³ Diary entry, 14th February 2011.

reality of a squatted 'free' world, which this particular man seemed to appreciate.¹²⁴ This vignette offers an example of the everyday brief interactions that occurred across the shop front, and reveals two common reactions to the freeshop: from the standpoint of a receiver, the excitement about the possibility to take anything one wanted, and from the standpoint of a donor, curiosity and a slight perplexity about the functioning of the space. The question that the elderly man posed exemplifies the questions that volunteers would regularly have to answer during their shift: why is everything free? Is the space a charity? Who is organising it? Who gave you this space? How is this possible?

The explanatory writings on the walls, the 'free stuff' on display in the space, and the space itself, all became dialogical objects around which conversations were expected to take place. The activities of explaining and discussing the logic of the project were central to the open door moment of political squatted spaces, as commented by a volunteer of Non Commercial House: "if you work in a freeshop, you have to explain a lot about anarchy and freeconomy".¹²⁵ By becoming a regular volunteer in the space I realised the importance of these performative explanations and the extent to which the openness of the space and the freeshop was part of a carefully thought-through performance. All the new volunteers in the space received a booklet titled *A little guide to OffMarket* that set out the basic principles and tasks of the social centre. Beyond regular maintenance of the space, the booklet explicitly asked volunteers to help making 'the place look nice' by drawing open the curtains, opening the entrance door and placing on the pavement outside the shop 'the board, the "this is a squat" and the "welcome and list of activities" signs'.¹²⁶ Interaction with visitors was explicitly encouraged as volunteers were expected to "make people welcome when they come in" and "check if they know what the place is about and if not explain them quickly".¹²⁷ The form taken by the explanation of the place was dependent on many contingent factors and on the volunteers' own experience in the space as "after some time you learn how to explain in one sentence, how to give the

¹²⁴ As I discovered after I started volunteering in the freeshop in May 2011.

¹²⁵ Maxigas, 2009: Another Buy Nothing Day at the Freeshop. *Indymedia London*, <http://london.indymedia.org/articles/3236> [accessed 12th March 2011].

¹²⁶ This staging of openness, and its props, are markers of the different uses of the space, shifting from a closed workshop and meeting space to a staged social space for 'the public'. *Source: A little guide to OffMarket*, 2011.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

short story or the long story. It depends on the human encounter: what is your mood at that moment and what the visitor wants to hear.”¹²⁸

Depending on the individual and on the ‘mood at the moment’, volunteers would offer the ‘long’ or the ‘short’ story, or sometimes simply welcome new comers and leave them to browse the space and read the writings. This was not always possible. On busy days when volunteers did not have time to greet newcomers, visitors could be seen walking in from the street, stopping in the middle of the space, looking around disoriented, and then realising that they meant to enter the adjacent RSPCA charity shop: the ‘mimetic’ appearance of the shop front was, to a certain degree, ‘misleading’.¹²⁹ In some circumstances the misunderstanding continued until they approached one of the volunteers with an object and asked ‘how much?’ The answer ‘it’s free’ would always create a moment of disbelief and suspicion; in the words of a freeshop volunteer, ‘the main response was ‘where’s the trick?’!¹³⁰ At this point, the role of the volunteers was to explain that there was ‘no trick’: the shop had been vacant for many years and was wasted, so it had been reclaimed and it was now free for social uses; the clothes, the books and other goods on display were similarly free because someone, somewhere, did not need them any more.

For many freeshop volunteers this particular speech-act constituted the ‘magical moment’ where the freeconomy logic of the space was understood by the newcomer, as an embodied moment of recognition where the ‘ethical spectacle’ of freeness enabled the transition from suspicion and surprise to complicity and solidarity.¹³¹ The performance of ‘freeness’ and ‘openness’ thus relied on the initial suspicion and disbelief of the interlocutor to score a political point: ‘everything in here is free because we live in a wasteful capitalist society which enforces scarcity’. The explanation was always accompanied by an active encouragement to swap rather than to simply take. Despite a high turnover of clothes and objects, the freeshop was constantly replenished which evidenced the success of the explanatory framework and the widespread support from local residents and traders.

On several occasions individuals explained how they actively preferred to donate to the freeshop rather than the adjacent charity shops, whose prices had

¹²⁸ As explained in Chapter 2 I volunteered in the freeshop of the second OffMarket from May to July 2011. This was prompted by the OffMarket e-newsletter 23rd May 2011 that asked new volunteers to get in touch or visit the space at the time of the weekly freeshop meeting.

¹²⁹ Conversation with a former member of the OffMarket collective, 14th April 2012.

¹³⁰ Diary entry, 5th June 2011.

¹³¹ Conversation with George, 27th June 2011.

allegedly increased as the presence of young professionals slowly shifted their branding strategies from second hand to ‘vintage’.¹³² On one occasion, even the volunteers at the nearby RSCP charity shop supported the freeshop by donating their old clothes racks; and the OffMarket collective witnessed great solidarity after the shop was raided by the Metropolitan police on the eve of the Royal Wedding, as local traders helped sweep away the shattered glass of the door from the floor and the pavement, and expressed sadness and anger at the violence of the operation.¹³³ Similarly, the organisers of the local flea market Homemade Hackney personally approached the OffMarket offering a free stall in their market to make the project more visible to local residents. Over several weeks in summer 2011 the OffMarket stall gave away women’s and children’s clothes, mostly to migrant families who spoke little English, and often at the end of the market day received donations from other traders.¹³⁴

‘Heavy’ and transformative encounters

As discussed in relation to the practitioners in the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, the experience of temporarily occupying a vacant shop can engender strong emotional encounters, particularly when projects claim to offer a platform for local communities, and practitioners have to mediate access and expectations. Presence in the space and public openness can be characterised by intensity and complexity, as publicness is negotiated and contested. How to address the performative emergence of publics through the open use of a temporary shop front? In recording my own experience as an OffMarket volunteer, I tried to account

¹³² On one occasion I was invited into the terraced house of a neighbour, who was moving out. He had come into the shop a few days earlier and had decided make his donations to us rather than approaching a charity shop. We brought back several used leather jackets, shoes and boots, both male and female, large sofa cushions, and a large wooden bookshelf. Diary entry, 7th June 2011. See also Alberto Duman’s reflections on the gentrification of Lower Clapton in Duman, A. 2012: Dispatches from ‘the frontline of gentrification’. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 16, 6, pp. 672-685.

¹³³ Diary entry, 27th June 2011. The raids were well documented on independent media and raised much indignation from the urban social movement community for being unjustified and unprovoked. The official reason offered was to seek evidence and information about actions that occurred during the large TUC demonstration on the 26th March 2011. See FIT Watch, *Police Raids on Squats and Social Projects*, 29th April 2011, <http://www.fitwatch.org.uk/2011/04/29/police-raids-on-squats-and-social-projects/> [accessed 15th June 2011].

¹³⁴ At the end of a market shifts, on Saturday 2nd July 2011, the market’s organisers came personally to thank us, saying that what we were doing was great and that they hoped we wouldn’t get evicted too soon.

for regular uses and users of the space as well as for those unexpected and eventful occurrences when encounters challenged and transformed existing relations between users and between users and the space.

It is important to mention how besides squatters and urban social movement activities, the vast majority of the users and visitors of the OffMarket, and particularly of the freeshop, were parents with small children, long-term unemployed, working-poor, pensioners and individuals with physical and mental disabilities. To reflect on the 'publics' engendered by the temporary shop front, I tried to describe regular users and volunteers by briefly annotating the informal conversations I had or heard during my shifts in the shop. It became rapidly apparent that many users and volunteers had suffered, and in many cases were still suffering, from economic and emotional hardship. Several received different forms of welfare support, and expressed anxiety about losing their homes and their income. In a few cases, they were squatting or living in overcrowded situations; some were undocumented while others were limited in their movements around the neighbourhood by ASBOs (Anti-Social Behaviour Orders) and dispersal zones. To many, it was clear that the OffMarket offered a communal space to spend time without the need to consume and a free resource for their clothes, shoes, linen and other objects.

In some of my diary entries I noted how, upon hearing those stories, I often felt a mixture of depression and anger at the structural conditions of social and economic deprivation to which the poorest inhabitants of North Hackney were subjected daily, and which would erupt into the street uprising and looting of the Hackney Riots only a month later, in early August 2011.¹³⁵ My diary entries contained in equal measure accounts of intense empathy and personal connection, and moments of incomprehension and alienation. As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, the levels of personal deprivation, particularly economic, were a constant reminder of the disparity between the activists and many poorer local residents. In performing the openness and freeness of the space, these disparities constituted important challenges to the politics of the space and its openness, which on some occasions offered the possibility of becoming transformative.

¹³⁵ Diary entry, 5th July 2011.

In a similar way to the experience of cultural practitioners running temporary projects in the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, the open door drop-in days were important sites for emotional encounters that made visible expectations about the project and the limits of the space. These encounters often relied on embodied and affective exchanges beyond verbal explanations, as I noted on several occasions. As previously explained, one of the uses of the freeshop was to offer a direct experience of a different form of economic distribution, based on sharing and the reuse of wasted resources. Low-income pensioners and older people, however, often came into the space under the impression that it was a regular charity shop.

During one of my afternoon shifts, two frail thin elderly women entered the shop and began browsing. I noticed that both were wearing old clothes and slippers. At one point they asked me to help them read the size of a pair of trousers because their sight was too weak. Then they asked for the price, and I explained that it was free. They were evidently confused and probably thought that they hadn't heard me well, so they asked me to repeat it a few times, which I did. I explained that everything in the shop was free. Once they understood my reply, I could see in their surprise that they were moved and their eyes became watery. One of them took my hand and held it for a time, thanking me profusely, and said that this would bring lot of luck to the person behind it. Her hand felt very thin, and I felt touched and shaken. After they left, I felt angry.¹³⁶ My empathic identification with the elderly women, and particularly the physical contact with one of them, shifted from affective openness into anger at their gratefulness. I tried to analyse my emotional reactions:

I did not want them to feel grateful for our 'hand outs' to them! I wanted them to take as much as they needed without the need for asking. I felt angry at a performance of 'freeness' that 'tricked them' into tears of gratefulness. Angry that the system we were in would place myself and the other volunteers in such a position of power over them.¹³⁷

Several months later, I discussed this incident with a member of collective. We agreed that the 'mimetic' visual strategy of the shop front was good to invite into the space people who were not already familiar with anarchist politics and who may have not entered a squatted social centre otherwise. Despite the immediate freeness, however, it was clear that the space was not 'free', in the sense that participating in

¹³⁶ Diary entry, 14th June 2011.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

sharing the resources was a way to teach the potential of direct action as a form of urban intervention, and sharing in the 'freeness' of the space and the goods in the freeshop was a form of propaganda which required people to understand the logic and act upon it.¹³⁸ In the case of the most elderly and vulnerable users, it was clear that the non-monetary exchange did not by itself institute radically different and transformative relations, and for those individuals the shop was "just another charitable place where for some reason things are free [and most would] just take without thinking too much".¹³⁹

After several shifts in the freeshop I also realised that for many vulnerable individuals living locally the shop had become a first point of contact, either when they did not know where to go or when they had been turned away from other local social services or charities. The sorts of requests and situations that ensued were sometimes emotionally draining. During an afternoon shift I once found myself briefly alone in the shop with several visitors browsing through the freeshop and demanding attention. At one point a woman came in, looking distressed, and asked to speak with the person in charge about 'a delicate matter'. As she did not want to say more, and I was not able to guess what kind of help she needed, I asked her to leave a message with me or in the diary for a member of the core collective, but she refused and left saying that she would return when the space was less busy.

After she left it occurred to me that perhaps the 'delicate matter' was of a sexual nature or about personal safety. Even though she did not say, from her glances and our brief exchange I wondered afterwards whether she might have felt in danger and was trying to sound out whether or not to trust me and to share her predicament. Something about my reaction and my inability to understand what she needed made her decide not to trust me. I felt utterly useless and unprepared, and wondered whether the other volunteers would have understood her hint and offered the help she wanted. In my frustration at my own inexperience, I realised that besides the texts on the walls and the 'staged' welcoming, encounters and open

¹³⁸ As argued by George Woodcock, anarchist conceptions of strategy are based on the conviction that means affect ends. The use of direct action (or 'propaganda by deed') is aimed at providing an example of action to follow freely on the path towards individual liberation. This idea historically has "found its expression in a succession of loose and impermanent groups and confederations of propagandists who see their duty not to lead the people so much as to enlighten and give example to them", in Woodcock, G. 1963: *Anarchism. A history of libertarian ideas and movements*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 15.

¹³⁹ Conversation with a former member of the OffMarket collective, 14th April 2012.

communications in the space sometimes occurred through quick intuitions and pre-verbal, affective understandings.¹⁴⁰

On another occasion I witnessed two members of the core collective offering both emotional and practical support in a situation where I wouldn't have known how to act. As I entered the shop at the beginning of my shift, I saw a woman crying, surrounded by several regular volunteers and users of the space, who were trying to console her. It appeared that she had fled her home and was hiding from an abusive partner, but did not have a place to spend the night. She had left her house on the spur of the moment without taking her purse and her pay-as-you-go mobile phone needed a top up. The situation gave rise to many spontaneous acts of support and care: some regular users offered tea and biscuits and invited her to take some clean clothes from the freeshop and to use the bathroom to shower and get changed, while the members of the core collective offered her the use of the OffMarket phone to call friends who could host her for a time.¹⁴¹

In my brief experience in the space, similar encounters with vulnerable individuals were often a source of frustration and a sense of impotence, as the project seemed to provide such a marginal relief to issues that clearly required more resources and a much more radical intervention. For some of those users, free clothes and a warm dry place to socialise and have free tea and biscuits were not countercultural alternatives to their everyday consumption of objects and spaces, but a direct answer to a material necessity. As written by volunteers at the long-term autonomous social centre The Cowley Club in Brighton, such experiences raise the question of whether open social centres are “more a stop gap in social services than a radical solution to society’s problems”.¹⁴²

At the same time, for some regular users and volunteers the OffMarket became a site of transformative experiences where disparities of resources and skills could be collectivised and acted upon. The freeshop for instance was very popular among parents of young children, something that was often commented upon by

¹⁴⁰ Diary entry, 7th June 2011.

¹⁴¹ Diary entry, 21st June 2011.

¹⁴² Volunteers of The Cowley Club discovered that local social services were encouraging vulnerable people to go to the club, which was providing cheap meals, advice, language classes and social space. Despite the collective desire to keep the space inclusive, untrained volunteers “found hard to deal with” situations arising from these expectation, and this referral became an issue within the club. Social centre Network (ed.) 2007: *What's this place? Stories from radical social centres in the UK & Ireland*. Leeds: Autonomous Geographies, <http://socialcentrestories.wordpress.com/> [accessed 7th July 2011], p. 23.

volunteers. Its popularity was evident in the rapidity with which the shelves with children and baby clothes and toys needed refilling, and in the regular requests made by men and women visiting the space who asked when volunteers were expecting to receive more.¹⁴³ Based on this shared observation and on informal conversations with young parents, a local activist mother in her 30s started an email list on a large piece of paper hung by the children's section, with the aim of joining forces and organising free childcare. The list and the idea rapidly became very popular as volunteers actively promoted it to visitors with children or browsing for children's clothing and toys. In this case, the openness of the space and of the volunteers to accommodate new activities and to act upon the emergence of needs and desires enabled quick decision-making and action. For low-income parents, the freeshop transformed from simply a space to swap clothes, into a place where they could self-organise around shared issues.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, a reaction to the rules of the space became a motive for self-organising language skill sharing activities. As explained in the previous chapters, the organisation of the shop heavily relied on written texts. On several occasions, however, new volunteers preferred to relay messages in person to particular members of the collective, which often created miscommunication and misunderstandings. Resistance to writing became apparent at one of the regular freeshop self-management meetings when, in order to solve a clear gender bias in those who undertook regular cleaning and maintenance tasks, the collective decided to devise a volunteer 'check list' with the tasks that had to be undertaken before, during and after each shift. One of the core volunteers of the freeshop, George, an unemployed man in his forties, openly questioned the need for the suggestion and ultimately did not participate in writing the task list.¹⁴⁵ Three weeks later, the reason for his resistance became apparent at a regular weekly meeting after one of the core members announced the decision to resume free English language swaps between volunteers and non-English speaking migrants.

Everyone immediately supported the proposal, except George, who intervened by saying that he had talked with a few people who volunteered or visited

¹⁴³ Diary entry, 31st May 2011.

¹⁴⁴ Unfortunately the first meeting had been scheduled for a day after the eviction of the second OffMarket, and was cancelled.

¹⁴⁵ Since the issue had been raised by two female volunteers, at the time I thought that his reluctance was based on some unspoken sexist prejudice. Notes from a freeshop meeting, 13th June 2011.

the space regularly, as well as with friends living locally, and they thought that it was not fair that English swap classes were 'only for migrants'. He was immediately queried on the meaning of his sentence. In the reaction to his intervention I sensed that many individuals in the room were afraid he was being racist. On the contrary, he continued cautiously by saying that English people too might sometimes need help with writing letters and reading documents. The OffMarket core member who had introduced the proposal commented that we should all encourage people to seek help and bring in documents or official communications to read together, if they needed help with official jargon. To this, George replied hurriedly: "well, you know, not everyone here can read and write, and it's not our fault if we have forgotten!" After a brief surprised pause, all those who could read and write hurriedly reassured him and everyone else in the meeting that reading and writing was a skill just like any other, to be shared and not to be taken for granted, and that of course nobody should feel it's their fault if they had to learn it again. It was collectively decided to begin regular 'English assistance classes' the following week.¹⁴⁶

This anecdote reveals the shared expectation that reading and writing came naturally to everyone involved to the extent of not realising that several regular volunteers and users had great difficulties with written texts. At the same time, a structure of weekly open meetings and facilitated discussions made it possible for George to raise publicly an issue that he and other volunteers must have been struggling with for several weeks of almost daily volunteering. He was also able to turn what might have been perceived as an individual stigma, as apparent in his justification, into a proposal for collective action. In this case too, this was a first move from volunteering or using the freeshop as a 'hang out' space and a 'free' shop, to reclaiming it as a resource for self-organisation and skill sharing.¹⁴⁷

The two experiences described above can be seen to indicate the openness of the space and its activities to reformulate its uses and priorities through the ongoing emergence of a public. The strategies of performative openness of the OffMarket were grounded in an attention to collective processes, and to the facilitation of regular moments of common reflections and search for collective solutions to issues arising through the public use of the space. In the strategy of the project, the freeshop

¹⁴⁶ Diary entry, 4th July 2011.

¹⁴⁷ The first class was scheduled for the 14th July 2011, but it never took place because the shop was evicted on the 7th July 2011.

constituted a crucial entry point, and unexpected site of emotional encounters, and a powerful and direct political intervention into local social-economic issues. It also constituted a form of action, through spatial appropriation and the redistribution of wasted resources, which set an example of a different way of conceiving and living the city; one which was actively supported by many local residents and traders. To some of the users, the 'trick' of using direct action to appropriate an empty site and share objects and resources, offered the possibility of transformative encounters that led to negotiating collective transformations of the space and its uses.

Negotiating openness and the performance of reuse

In mainstream promotional representations, practices of temporary vacant shop reuse are meant to offer positive urban experiences through visual and embodied presence. Focusing on two neighbourhoods and two practices of temporary shop reuse, in this chapter I have addressed the experiential dimension of reuse by drawing attention to the performative 'staging' of openness and to moments of public encounter. While both projects presented themselves as open platforms for 'local communities', each presented very different conditions of openness and were framed by different expectations and aims. The analysis of the experience of 'creative' temporary activities in vacant units of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, with which I began the chapter, offered in-depth insights into the relationship between temporary uses and local regeneration agendas. As the shopping centre management's declared reason for offering units rent free was to encourage a 'positive, positive, positive' experience of the space by capitalising on practitioners and visitors 'milling around' in the centre, the publicness and community-orientation of the projects were framed within a strategy of place-marketing in times of uncertainty.

The expectation of engendering publics was increasingly recognised by practitioners as both an obligation towards the management and towards the other unpaid participants in the project. The community-orientation of their aims seemed thus to resemble progressively an exercise of public relations, as the demand for 'positive' activities in the space created unspoken pressure on practitioners to maintain a neutral stance towards powerful local agents and to filter out negative and critical voices. Thus, while the Studio at the Elephant project presented itself in its

public address and communication as an open platform, the material and symbolic conditions for its presence in the shopping centre influenced the autonomy and openness of the activities in the space.

At the same time, the practitioners' decision to host open door drop in sessions created the possibility for direct encounters and challenges to the project, as passers-by and visitors questioned its role in the area, and its real openness to the community. Practitioners' own reflections on such critical encounters were analysed as important moments of visibility of the conflictive cultural politics of occupying vacant spaces in a rapidly changing urban area. Tense encounters brought to light assumptions and misunderstandings around practitioners' knowledge and involvement with a conflictive large-scale regeneration scheme, and local residents' frustrations with its uncertain and confusing time-line.

In the second half of the chapter I have drawn on these reflections to address the experience of the temporary shop fronts squatted and used by the OffMarket collective in Lower Clapton, Hackney. In stark contrast to the carefully negotiated temporary reuse in the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, the OffMarket offered an autonomous frame and a self-determined way of coordinating activities and access. Drawing on my own and on practitioners' accounts, I have examined everyday uses of the space and the public encounters that it generated, and argued that the openness and the publicness of the squatted shop had to be similarly mediated and negotiated through forms of address, 'staged' performances and processes of explanation and dialogue. In practitioners' self-reflective accounts and my own experience in the two shops, the strategy of 'open door policy' combined with a freeshop constituted a crucial time-space for unpredictable public interactions and discussions. At the same time, the mimetic public appearance of the freeshop created a potentially ambiguous space of encounter that made visible the limits of 'freeconomy' as a direct challenge to market relations; as for many poor and vulnerable residents the space was a site of necessity and charity, rather than a space of liberation.

It can be argued, therefore, that the limits and potentials of temporary practices in vacant shops are informed as much by practitioners' performances and negotiations of openness, and their strategies of facilitation, as by the material conditions of the spatial occupation and the expectations of users and visitors. In both projects of temporary use, the claim to open a public space for a community

beyond its specific artistic or activist scenes produced complex entanglements of demands and responsibilities, and potentially 'agonistic' encounters, demanding face-to-face and at times conflictive negotiations.¹⁴⁸ At the same time, it has become clear in the course of my analysis that the face-to-face encounters across the threshold of temporarily occupied vacant spaces are not to be considered refuges of authenticity from globalised urban dynamics.¹⁴⁹ On the contrary, as analysed in the case of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, the increasing “hyperawareness of ‘spectacle and theatricality’”¹⁵⁰ in urban agendas has identified participatory neighbourhood-scale practices as useful tools in urban place-marketing, and practitioners' great awareness of their visual and embodied role as 'representative' of the centre framed the potential of transforming subjectivities and power relations. In contrast, the explicitly political framework of the more autonomous OffMarket made possible to open to the public not just the physical space, but also its uses, through a process of re-composition and re-articulation of power and knowledge relations among users and visitors. The proposals for skill sharing and organising discussed in this chapter indicated the emergence of potentially transformative moments of collectivisation of resources for previously individualised issues.

Finally, in this chapter I have addressed the emotional and affective geographies of temporary reuse. In my analysis of the effects of the 'place activation' discourse of official reuse, discussed in Chapter 3, I challenged the idea of passive audiences of an engineered urban spectacle, and examined the ways in which the local communities 'to be activated' were actively vocal in their questioning of the motives and aims of the projects of reuse. The emotional geographies of temporary reuse were thus far from the seamless urban spectacle imagined by critics of neoliberal urbanism and a fine-grained approach revealed different degrees of resistance and querying, both personal and in relation to others. Because of this, encounters in the spaces were emotionally 'heavy' and the descriptions of practitioners, as well as my own diary entries, were often polarised between strong

¹⁴⁸ As reflected by Sophie Watson, it is inevitable that 'agonistic urban encounters' are generated whenever differences are engaged with, imbalances of power are acknowledged and addressed, and outcomes are not pre-determined. Watson, S. 2006: *City Publics. The (dis)enchancements of urban encounters*. London: Routledge, p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ See my discussion in Chapter 1 following Amin, A. and Thrift, N.J. 2002: *Cities: reimagining the urban*. Cambridge: Polity.

¹⁵⁰ Levin and Solga, *Building Utopia*, p. 39.

positive and negative emotions, which often challenged the personal motives, assumptions and behaviours of those who find themselves on the front line.

If drawing on a logic of affects means to attend to the powers of temporary spatial appropriation, in my analysis I have argued that the intensity of open practices of use can be both 'augmenting' and 'diminishing' users' disposition to action. At times, the excitement and transversal empathic coming together of different users and volunteers increased and enriched collective thinking and acting. On other occasions, the intense openness gave rise to a decreased ability to empathise and act, due to the emotional exhaustion of being constantly required to perform availability to opinions, requests and complex unexpected situations. These reflections are crucial to address the power and potential of physically opening up sites for community activities as a generative and transformative moment of intensification of relation, but also reveal the limits of 'openness' and the necessity to consider the affective labour of publicness. The attention to the emotional and affective dimensions of temporary reuse thus presents wider implications for understanding urban spatial politics of collective and open use, and for addressing the potentially generative affective powers of spatial appropriation and commoning.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Vasudevan, A. 2011: Dramaturgies of dissent: the spatial politics of squatting in Berlin, 1968-. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, pp. 283-303.

Conclusions

From temporary use to a critique of the temporary city

If at some time in the near future the ephemeral becomes more prevalent, which is entirely conceivable, what would it consist of? In the activities of groups that are themselves ephemeral [...]¹

Practices of temporary vacant space occupation inhabit and constitute complex and ambiguous urban geographies. In this thesis, I have aimed to address critically the politics of temporary use as a form of urban action by questioning its alleged alterity. In addressing issues of structure and issues of agency, I have presented a series of empirically-informed reflections on the limitations and potentials of temporary projects in vacant spaces, which complicate and challenge binary readings of ‘compliant’ or ‘resistant’ practices, and which raise urgent political questions about ways of understanding and conceptualising temporary appropriations in relation to existing urban dynamics. With this research, I have undertaken a critical and in-depth investigation of the claims, constraints and strategies of practitioners on the ground as they negotiate open and free temporary access to vacant shops in inner London.

Returning to the fundamental question posed at the beginning of this thesis – how to critically conceptualise the politics of temporary urban practices without foreclosing their radical potential? – I have attempted an answer through a critical engagement with practitioners’ and activists’ tactics and strategies, and offered both a substantive analysis and a possible critical theoretical framework. Throughout my research I have argued that the potential of temporary practices of vacant shop reuse to disrupt existing urban discourses and dynamics and to prefigure other forms of urban relations has to be addressed through a situated critical framework attentive both to material conditions and to their performative and imaginative re-articulation. Corresponding to the three substantive chapters of my thesis, I thus offer, as a way of concluding, three main entry points into the politics of temporary reuse: questions of representation, of appropriation and use, and of intense public encounters.

¹ Lefebvre, H. 2003 (1970): *The Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 98.

Politics of representation

My first set of conclusions concerns the processes that inform the production and dissemination of imaginaries and narratives of ‘temporary urbanism’, and the necessity of a critical attention to the performative powers of representation and self-representation. As argued in the course of Chapter 3, the discourse of temporary urban reuse is inhabited by a set of diverse and contradictory narratives competing for visibility in a shifting economic and political context marked by the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2010 UK national elections. Urban entrepreneurial ‘creative cities’ ideas have been shown to imbue small-scale policy interventions that assign to community-oriented practitioners the role of reanimating vacant urban spaces. In my analysis I have also addressed and examined the ways in which notions and policies of temporary shop reuse mutated from national policy to local authorities schemes and third sector intermediaries, and responded to the geographically uneven effects of the recession.²

In analysing the official narratives of policy-makers, private sector’s campaigns and media representations around the positive role of temporary uses in times of recession, my research has reconfirmed the discursive tropes that inform the discursive production of urban decay and the need to ‘regenerate’. In contexts of rapid urban change, mainstream imaginaries of practices of reuse ‘activating’ existing urban locales were seen to contain a normative blueprint for a preferred type of activated city. In areas marked by direct displacement or displacement pressures, such as many of the inner city London neighbourhoods discussed in the course of my thesis, the analysis of official narratives of temporary reuse revealed compliance with local and citywide agendas of urban development. The cases of the *London Meanwhile Competition* in Newham and of the *Art in Empty Space* scheme in Hackney, discussed in Chapter 3, clearly indicated the intention of local authorities to deploy temporary projects in order to increase the visibility of urban areas to investors in the contexts of urban re-branding strategies, thus confirming debates in critical urban theory on the use of temporary creative practices to push forward place marketing agendas.³

² McCann, E. and Ward, K. 2011: *Mobile urbanism: cities and policymaking in the global age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. See also Peck, J. 2011: Geographies of policy. From transfer-diffusion to mobility-mutation. *Progress in Human Geography* 35(6), pp. 773-797.

³ In relation to 1970s New York, see Greenberg, M. 2000: Branding Cities. *Urban Affairs Review* 36, pp. 228-263; and Greenberg, M. 2008: *Branding New York: how a city in crisis was sold to the world*.

From the standpoint of practitioners' self-representation, on the contrary, my research has shown a great degree of fluidity and ambiguity of the imaginaries and narratives of temporary reuse as meanings and positions are negotiated over and in some cases strongly contested. The critical community-oriented temporary projects in shop fronts that I examined in detail, all revealed a high degree of awareness of their self-representation and positionalities, and considered the space of urban imaginaries one of their sites of intervention. Critical representations and self-representations thus need to be understood as central elements not just of the discourse of temporary urbanism, but of radical urban politics more broadly, since how the city is imagined "creates the conditions of possibility for how we act, which itself creates the contours of that very space".⁴

Among the practices discussed, the most sophisticated example of representational critique was perhaps offered by *The £100 Shop* and its clever hyperbole of gentrification in Dalston, even if, in its critique, the project failed to propose alternative urban imaginaries. The case of the *Centre for Possible Studies*, on the contrary, revealed a conscious attempt to challenge imaginaries of 'heritage' and 'public space', promoted by the official regeneration discourse for Edgware Road in Westminster, by offering visibility to less evident local cultures. The programming of the space and its local outreach were crucially interlinked with this aim. Similarly, the practitioners at *Studio at the Elephant* envisaged their programme of activities as an attempt to celebrate 'the Elephant' in a context in which negative representations of the area were consciously deployed by powerful urban actors to justify the demolition of local council housing and community infrastructures.

With regard to a direct engagement with social justice issues and urban politics, many of the squatted shop fronts discussed, such as *Non Commercial House* and the *OffMarket*, had a clear communication strategy that strongly and openly linked the occupation of vacant spaces to the enforced scarcity of common space produced by market economies. Moreover, by addressing the negative media portrayal of squatting and the public calls for its criminalisation, their self-representations actively challenged existing urban narratives and logics based on

London: Routledge. More recently, in relation to 2000s Berlin, see Colomb, C. 2012: Pushing the Urban Frontier: Temporary Uses of Space, City Marketing, and the Creative City Discourse in 2000s Berlin. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 34, pp. 131-152.

⁴ Watson, S. 2006: *City Publics. The (dis)enchantments of urban encounters*. London: Routledge, p. 8.

private property rights, and reclaimed the city for local and collective uses. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, however, in the experiences of both the *OffMarket* and of *Studio at the Elephant*, the proposal of offering a space to ‘the local community’ became a complex issue to negotiate through strategies of performative openness and through personal and collective exchanges with the ‘publics’ of the projects.

My first theoretical contribution, therefore, relates to the necessity of approaching the representation and self-representation of temporary urban projects as existing within a dynamic field of position-takings in dialogue with existing urban agendas and wider urban imaginaries. The critical dimension of temporary practices has therefore to be assessed both in its critique of existing narratives and dynamics, and in its ability to offer visibility to alternative ways of urban inhabitation. The potential of practices of temporary reuse to challenge and propose critical alternatives to existing urban imaginaries thus demands a careful attention to the often complex and site-specific discursive position-takings of practitioners and activists and to their strategies for visual and textual interventions.

Politics of appropriation and use

The second set of conclusions to be drawn concerns the material conditions of temporary reuse and their relationship to wider urban dynamics. As discussed throughout my thesis, the materialities of temporary reuse are often overlooked in the official and unofficial narratives of temporary urbanism. In Chapter 4, I have addressed the correspondences and inconsistencies between these narratives and practitioners’ claims, on the one hand, and the actual materialities of temporary reuse, on the other: ‘what goes unsaid’ about temporary urban projects. A central question concerned the conditions of practitioners’ access to vacant buildings, and their relationship to local, regional and national policy frameworks. By analysing in detail a small selection of practices of temporary shop front reuse in inner London, I was able to reveal the fine-grained different and specific economic, legal and social arrangements that enable short-term urban occupations.

While national policies and discourse present temporary shop front reuse as a panacea for recessional Britain, the lawful practices in the four inner city boroughs examined offered a clear example not of recessional landscapes, but of the

interconnection between temporary reuse and the redevelopment agendas of property owners, managers and local authorities in the capital. In the case of *Make-Do*, for instance, rent-free access to the shop unit was the direct result of a relatively large investment by Camden Council in pop-up shop activities for the purpose of place marketing, and of the support of a publicly funded intermediary, Meanwhile Space. Westminster Council, on the contrary, did not have an official funded scheme for non-profit temporary shop front reuse, as revealed through the experience of *Group+Work*, and in their quest for vacant sites the coordinators of the *Centre for Possible Studies* relied entirely on local private landlords, albeit within the framework of public regeneration plans. The temporary shop front practices in the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, such as *Studio at the Elephant*, were also directly supported by a local private developer, and framed indirectly by Southwark Council's plans for regenerating the area.

By placing temporary practices in relation to the complex local and global geographies of urban governance and real estate investment, I was able to observe the uneven connections between wider urban dynamics and locally specific conditions, and to challenge the dominant representations of vacant properties as the product of economic decline. At the same time, my case studies also offered insights into the geographical differences of the apparently limitless expansion of London as a site of global investment and 'regeneration'.⁵ It is telling to compare projects at the two ends of the spectrum, the institutionally supported *Centre for Possible Studies* and the squatted, self-organised *OffMarket*. After the *Centre*'s move, the two shop fronts it had inhabited became a celebrity jewellery boutique and a flagship new-build residential, commercial and retail complex, clearly indicating the position of Marble Arch and the Edgware Road on the map of luxury consumption and real estate investment in London.

The shops occupied by the *OffMarket* squatted social centres became instead, respectively, a chain payday loan and pawn shop, an expensive hairdresser that markets itself as a 'boutique salon'⁶, while the last one, on Dalston Lane, remains to

⁵ For a specifically London-focused analysis of the 'regeneration industry', see Imrie, R., Lees, L. and Raco, M. 2009: *Regenerating London: governance, sustainability and community in a global city*. London: Routledge.

⁶ On the website of the *Blue Tit* hairdresser it is stated, rather aptly given my discussion of experiential urban economies, that 'a haircut should be an experience, not just a transaction', see <http://www.bluetitlondon.co.uk/> [accessed 10th May 2013].

this day boarded-up alongside a series of vacant shops awaiting redevelopment since the mid 2000s. In the (temporary) epilogues of these two practices of reuse can thus be read examples of commercial gentrification in West London, both ‘classic’ and new-build, and its more uncertain counterpart in the North East, with ‘pioneering’ lifestyle shops among signs of increasing poverty and disinvestment. In order to assess the alterity of temporary projects in relation to existing urban dynamics, therefore, it is essential to address the specific urban agendas that inform vacancy and its reuse, and to approach the question of gentrification and place marketing through a detailed and longitudinal study of the areas where they take place.

The second element analysed in relation to the materialities of temporary reuse concerns the diverse economies that sustained the projects, and its related question of labour. The official discourse of temporary reuse promotes an entrepreneurial ‘connectionist narrative’ according to which shop fronts and volunteers come together and disperse again effortlessly and seamlessly. In order to read critically this imaginary, I drew on Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s concept of a ‘projective city’ to discuss the ideology of the ‘project’ as a ‘connexionist’ mode of labour and life.⁷ In the context of early 21st century London, the imaginary of an emancipatory and flexible mode of projective organisation is often a smokescreen for the uneven access to paid and secure employment, and to cultural and economic resources. Through an in-depth engagement with the life and work stories of organisers and participants, in this thesis I have argued that practitioners’ and activists’ ability to occupy a site at short notice and on a temporary basis is often symptomatic of exclusionary and unsustainable dynamics of labour and life precarity.⁸ A critical materialist attention to the conditions of temporary use thus points to temporariness as a dominant form of urban inhabitation for practitioners and activists involved in critical cultural and political practices. Although individual projects might be perceived as ‘temporary’ by practitioners and their fleeting audiences, their temporariness is becoming an increasingly permanent trend.⁹

⁷ Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. 2005: *The new spirit of capitalism*. London: Verso. In their argument, the ‘projective city’ embodies the pervasive logic of flexible form of organisation and self-organisation that appeared during the 1960s and 1970s in critical opposition to the mainstream organisation of labour and society in Western Europe and North America after WWII.

⁸ For a critical overview of the geographical implications of the notion of precarity, see Waite, L. 2009: A Place and Space for a Critical Geography of Precarity?, *Geography Compass*, 3, pp. 412–433.

⁹ Lloyd, R. 2004: The Neighbourhood in Cultural Production: Material and Symbolic Resources in the

While being critical of the exclusionary dynamics generated by the enforced flexibility of temporary uses, in the course of my research it was also important to give visibility and value the forms of network organising, free labour and in-kind support which practitioners and activists were able to mobilise in order to sustain their projects. The subjective and inter-subjective strategies and tactics deployed by practitioners to deal with the material constraints of temporary occupations offer the possibility to re-conceptualise notions of urban scarcity. Instead of conceptualising a finite economy of time and space, the non-monetary solidarity-based forms of acting of forms of temporary occupations can offer ways to radically rethinking current dominant doctrines of economic austerity and their underlying naturalisation of scarcity of space and resources.¹⁰ In this, the diverse ‘free’ economies and the non-hierarchical forms of managing the space mobilised by the *OffMarket* offered a powerful and thoughtful model of mutual exchange and commoning.

Drawing together a reflection on access and use, my second conceptual contribution therefore regards the relationship between labour and life precarity and dynamics of redevelopment and gentrification in the ‘temporary city’. The alternative potential of mobilising of people and resources outside the city’s monetised economies needs to be critically examined through an attention to the exclusionary dynamics of ‘temporariness’ as a mode of inhabiting the city. If temporary urbanism is informed and pervaded by precarious and unpaid forms of labour, and if it fundamentally reproduces fast-paced dynamics of investment and gentrification in inner London, then temporary practices of reuse seems to indicate, rather than a utopian future, further dispossession and accumulation of wealth in the hands of a privileged few. At the same time, these exchanges and forms of organising can also be indications of powerful forms of negotiating, reworking and transforming adverse conditions by engendering different forms of collective urban acting. There is thus a strong urgency to rethink, from the question of the conditions of flexible temporary reuse, what constitutes alternative forms of social organisation and spatial use in contemporary ‘projective’ cities.

New Bohemia. *City & Community* 3(4), pp. 343-372. See also McRobbie, A. 2004: Making a Living as a Visual Artists in London’s Small Scale Creative Economy. In Power, D. and Scott, A. J. (eds) *Cultural industries and the production of culture*. London: Routledge.

¹⁰ Jeremy Till has described it as a ‘mythology of scarcity’ in Till, J. 2011: Constructed scarcity, working paper presented at the SCIBE Conference (Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment), University of Westminster, London, 26th -28th February 2013.

Politics of public encounters

Finally, the third set of conclusions of my research relates to the potential of temporary practices of shop front reuse to engender unexpected spatial experiences and to facilitate public encounters. As I have discussed throughout my thesis, a key part of the rationale and appeal of temporary urban projects is the promise of positive urban experiences capable of dispelling the negative imaginaries of social and economic decline associated with empty and boarded-up shops. Returning to the question of understanding the radical potentials of re-appropriating spaces through direct use, it is useful to recall that the Lefebvrian theory of the 'right to appropriation' stands specifically against "the conception of urban space [...] as a commodity to be valorised (or used to valorise other commodities) by capitalist production".¹¹ In the deployment of temporary use for engendering positive experiential economies, however, it is possible to read a valorisation of commodified land and properties.

As I analysed in detail in Chapter 5 in relation to the diverse temporary activities inside the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, the 'positive, positive, positive' agenda of the Centre's manager clearly revealed his understanding of the role of creative pop-up shops. The experiential value of temporary uses, even when not directly funded by the owners or managers of a site, thus has a place in mainstream contemporary visual and embodied cultures of the city. Beyond a binary reading of space appropriation as an expression of radical 'use value' against the exchange value of commodified space, in my final substantive chapter I have attempted a more fine-grained understanding of the experiential economies produced through temporary uses and of their publicness. In attending to the geographically specific discursive framing of each project, I have engaged critically with the claims of practitioners and activists to facilitate temporary public platforms open to the local community and with their everyday encounters across the shop fronts.

My in-depth participant observation of two practices of community-oriented reuse revealed the need to think the publicness of temporary reuse through an analysis of the processes of engendering publics and of mediating meanings and unexpected encounters. Both the *OffMarket* and *Studio at the Elephant* contended with spaces that did not belong to conventionally understood and planned 'public'

¹¹ Purcell, M. 2002: Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant. *GeoJournal* 58 (2), pp. 99-108.

spaces, and in both cases the organisers and volunteers choreographed and actively encouraged open access across the threshold, through the open programming of activities and the regular open door hours. In order to discuss their radical openness as relationally constituted through spatial appropriation and use, I devoted particular attention to the textual and embodied negotiations of the boundaries of the shop fronts, and to the performative indeterminacy which in both cases marked the limit of the scripted interactions and the beginning of challenges and self-reflexive repositioning.

By focusing on the performative encounters engendered through public events and open door days, I have addressed the intersubjective dimension of the 'ethical spectacle' beyond a simplified understanding of performers and audiences.¹² In analysing the sometimes antagonistic encounters with the 'local communities' recounted by *Studio at the Elephant*'s practitioners and by Kay, for instance, I have highlighted the ways in which the 'publics' actively challenged the rationales of their presence in the Centre. In the case of the *Studio* in particular, some encounters actively questioned the framing of a project that claimed openness to the 'community' but was selective in its refusal to host explicitly political activities in the context of a much contested regeneration scheme. Rather than smooth 'positive' creative experiences, these experiences of temporary uses showed the contested co-production and negotiation of publicness and its relation to forms of spatial and social injustice.

My own experience as a regular contributor and member of the audience at *Studio at the Elephant* and as a user and volunteer at the *OffMarket* enabled me to observe the power of embodied presence in the space, and offered insights into the emotional and affective geographies of facilitating a temporary open space in areas marked by rapid urban change. In both cases the openness of the shop fronts was often characterised by emotionally intense encounters, which highlighted how practices perceived from the outside as fleeting, can be lived by participants and users as intensively transformative on a personal and collective level. Emotions such as anger, joy and resentment indicate tensions and moments of self-reflexivity in practitioners' narrations of their own experiences, and of powerful affective

¹² See Routledge, P. 2010: *Dreaming the Real: a Politics of Ethical Spectacle*. In Birch, K. and Mykhnenko, V. (eds), *The rise and fall of neoliberalism: the collapse of an economic order?*. London: Zed Book.

dynamics among users of the space. The emotionally charged narratives of organisers, volunteers and users, therefore, challenge ideas of temporariness as shallow and inconsequential which neglect the long-term effects of transformative affective events. Beyond imaginaries of exceptionality and alterity, moreover, an attention to emotional and affectual relations points to the need to question the performance of positive exuberance of representations and self-representations of reuse. By addressing the exhaustion of continuous public openness and of a constant performance of activity, these reflections also contribute to wider debates on immaterial labour, and on emotional and affectual urban geographies.

The third theoretical contribution offered by my research is therefore an argument for addressing the alterity of temporary reuse through the analysis of the politics of experiential urban economies and their affective and emotional dimensions. Bringing the political discussion to the level of encounters and collective negotiations reveals the powerfully unsettling potential of publicness and openness as wider urban tensions are expressed and articulated. In this, the potential of practices of temporary reuse to propose alternative urban experiences and to generate potentially transformative public encounters needs to be addressed through an understanding of the unequal power relations at play, and of the ways in which public and open use is practically engendered. The claim to facilitate open platforms, if it is to be understood as something more than a carefully choreographed curatorial exercise in local community-engagement, should therefore be accompanied by a politics of radical openness that enables users to exercise their ‘power to’ transform vacant spaces according to collectively negotiated needs and desires.

Towards a critical theory of temporary urbanism

In moving from a study of temporary reuse towards a critical theory of temporary urbanism, it is crucial to question the nexus between vacant spaces and temporariness as inherently alternative to existing urban dynamics. Through a substantive detailed analysis of the intricate politics of temporary shop front reuse in inner London between 2009 and 2011, with this thesis I have argued that the study of representations, materialities and experiences of vacant space reuse points to broader issues of critical and propositional urban acting in contemporary cities. In my understanding, the political implications of temporary reuse should be approached as

revealing significant ambiguities and shifting position-takings in the process of experimenting with 'alternative' urban imaginaries and practices. In order to analyse tensions, ambiguities and negotiations it is necessary to move from 'the romance of resistance' and to focus, in Matthew Sparke's words, on "the messy middle grounds where control and opposition, structure and agency, hegemony and counter-hegemonic action, are all variously mediated."¹³ In drawing attention to the personal and collective processes of meaning-making and its tensions, I have thus tried to account for the politics of powerful moments of mediation and negotiation as they engender self-critique and subjective transformation.

A clear political concern in this 'messy middle ground' is time. As a form of urban action, temporary practices of reuse create ways of accessing and making use of spaces, but they also simultaneously embody forms of temporal foreclosure. The experiences examined in the course of my research proposed very different forms of occupying vacant spaces, but they were all short-lived. What if the desire for 'cities for people, not for profit' became possible, but only in the interim, in the ephemeral short-term of spatial occupations? The question of temporal foreclosure thus requires a rethinking of the type of city proposed through the temporary urban imaginary. A key question to be taken forward from my research, therefore, concerns the kind of city inhabitants imagined by this new paradigm, as suggested by the quotation from Henri Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution* at the beginning of this chapter. If temporary urbanism were to become more prevalent, what would its cities and its inhabitants consist of? And how could the 'ephemeral groups' that make possible its temporary activities renegotiate the temporal horizon of their projects, without being simply pushed elsewhere following a dominant logic of urban precarity?

To remain open to these questions, a critical theory of temporary urbanism must retain an understanding of the potentiality of collective processes of occupation and use, and of their negotiated publicness. Such a theory requires addressing the ambiguous duality of temporariness as both an everyday tactic for inhabiting and surviving the precarious city and a strategy for coming together and commoning spaces, knowledges and resources. In thinking about this commoning, it is essential to retain a focus on the expanded materialities of reuse as capable of engendering intense and transformative encounters. The question of the affective urban

¹³ Sparke, M. 2008: Political geography - political geographies of globalization III: resistance. *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (3), p. 423.

geographies generated through temporary occupations, furthermore, has to be addressed beyond the immediacy of reuse in its ability to permeate other time-spaces through a potential increased disposition to action. The traces of the intense encounters of temporary reuse may surface again in other forms of collectively coming together to appropriate and shape other urban spaces and times. Addressing their diffusion and dissemination after the surge of concentrated intensity of spatial occupation requires in-depth, longitudinal and situated approaches, and an expanded understanding of political action.

In a period of increased urban precarisation, the direct appropriation of spaces, even if short-term, can offer a focus and a possibility for unexpected and intense encounters. A critical theory of temporary urbanism thus has to be attentive to the potential of temporary uses to encourage transformative collective processes of spatial reclaiming and re-articulation. The performative public encounters across the threshold of appropriated spaces can constitute moments when the neoliberal spectacle of reuse is laid bare to questioning, critiques and demands, and can engender powerful collective processes of politicisation in relation to different forms of spatial and social injustice. Rethinking precarious urban politics of reuse means to account for the powerful moments of transformation that occur through unexpected conversations and forms of practical solidarity that connect transversally pre-existing groups and positions, and make visible both the contradictions of neoliberal urbanism as well as the prefigurative potentials of alternative urban imaginaries.

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Timeline of conversations and interviews (2010-12)

[illegible]

Note: while all names of projects of temporary reuse are real, the names of some participants have been replaced by aliases, following participants' wishes.